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PROSPERITY STREET

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BY
BARNABY BROOK



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*To
Rose Coles
who tended the
bride and
adopted the groom*

FOREWORD

THE PUBLICATION of so intimate a document as this book requires, perhaps, some justification. I cannot do better than print here a letter from Sir Peter Wass, who was the oldest friend of the statesman whose story is told in the pages that follow. Writing from Rome last year Sir Peter says:

"My dear Barnaby,

"I have thought over the problem which confronts you—which, indeed, confronts us all. In writing your official biography of Peyton you must of necessity, draw largely upon the manuscript which I passed to you, but I agree that unless some less formal revelation of what he has called his 'real life' is made, his object in telling his own story will be defeated.

"Whether he anticipated so early a publication of his manuscript, I doubt; but that he meant it some day to be published I cannot doubt. This being so, I can only, as his literary executor, agree that you should edit his own manuscript and give it a separate existence from your formal 'Life.'

"The revelation will neither injure nor embarrass anyone now, and it may, perhaps, comfort some of my own generation to learn that even so vital and eupeptic a personality as Peyton had to make terms with circumstance and suffer that waning of youthful zest which successful ambitionism nearly always means.

"You recently gave to us a study of unwitting selfishness in a woman. Peyton's story is really a naïve reve-

lation of the same unwitting selfishness in a man. But you will do him a grave injustice if, either in editing his own story or writing the biography, you allow him to seem other than the charming friend and great-hearted statesman that he was. A lesser man might have allowed himself to warp the lives of two women: a bigger man might in youth have found the world well lost for love. My own criticism of him seems implicit in his own narrative. Beyond such implication I do not judge him. He was always my friend.

"Yours sincerely,

Peter Wass."

To those of my readers to whom Francis Peyton has hitherto been only the adulated leader of a political party I would say that in editing these pages I have changed nothing and added nothing. I have, however, deleted a few passages.

BARNABY BROOK.

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BOOK ONE
JOAN

CHAPTER ONE

§ 1

WHEN I TELL you that Mrs. Gallus—fat Mrs. Gallus—lived in Prosperity Street you must not imagine that I am merely using a pleasant and idle metaphor for material success. That the two rows of red brick houses were together and collectively called Prosperity Street was attested by the official metal plate which a thoughtful Administration had caused to be nailed on the wall of each of the corner houses, so that the wayfarer who came along Battle Road, to the South, or up Calamity Hill, on the North, might know, against all the evidence of his five senses, that this was indeed Prosperity Street. He might well have mistaken it else for Penury Place or Desperation Row. We who lived there when I was young would have rechristened it, I cannot doubt, had we had the chance, the Street of Good Hope. Mrs. Gallus—fat Mrs. Gallus—probably knew it in her heart as the Fair Haven, if she ever thought of these things.

Three hundred years before Prosperity Street was built, or named, a Cromwellian force had camped on that very ground, and had given fierce battle all the day. The tradition of that great fight was enshrined, as you have guessed, in the naming of Battle Road and Calamity Hill. For two and a half centuries Battle Road must have been Battle Lane. The industrial revolution, the improvement of road surfaces, and the coming of wheeled transport, together transformed the open country, where the Roundheads lay, into the ragged outpost of a growing manufacturing township. Where Fairfax fought sprang up little shops and rows of rapidly constructed houses, and, when the tram lines were laid down, the

Lane became ennobled into Battle Road. Then, probably, in a flash of gratitude or a mood of complacency, some speculative builder called his latest dividend-earning venture "Prosperity Street."

Last night, during the Housing debate, a back bencher on the Opposition side accused me of being remote and detached from the lives of the poor. Hansard is before me as I write, and the passage leaps out from the double columned context.

"The Right Honorable gentleman imagines that he can apply a bureaucratic formula to a problem which is psychological. I do not say that he lacks good intention, but, Mr. Speaker, he is detached and remote from the lives of the poor. No man who is lapped in the luxury of the Rt. Hon. gentleman and who was cradled in the easy circumstances of his youth can feel in this matter as those whose lives are spent in uncertainty and poverty must feel. I am bold enough to say, Sir, that only those who have had experience of small houses and who have known the conditions under which the poor exist can hope to provide accommodation which shall be at one and the same time economic and satisfactory. How would the Rt. Hon. gentleman like to live with, say, two other families in a five-roomed house, without a garden and with inadequate sanitary provision?"

When he said that, and his colleagues responded with the usual "Hear hear!" I slipped even further down on the Treasury Bench and smiled. My worthy critic said "It is easy to sneer and smile," and drew more "Hear hears." But I was thinking of Prosperity Street and dear old fat Mrs. Gallus, and Marion Mary Gallus, and Peter Wass, and Pa Gallus, and the lame girl from the corner shop, and Joan Agnew. So vividly did it all come back that I murmured to myself:

Each life unfulfilled, you see;

It hangs still, patchy and scrappy:

We have not sighed deep, laughed free,

Starved, feasted, despaired—been happy.

At this old Bletchley at my side brought me back to the realities of the debate by leaning towards me and saying, with that heavy intonation of his: "Pardon?"

"Nothing," I said. "I was only making a phrase."

"There's nothing to answer here," he commented, and rolled back to his usual posture, with his plump hands crossed on his capacious paunch, and his little legs stretched out in a valiant attempt to reach the Table, the very picture of a solid and trustworthy Chancellor of the Exchequer.

But there was something to answer, and I am going to forestall my probably inept biographer by trying, in what little leisure my Office leaves me, to answer it.

§ 2

It was one of those rather detestable days in January when there is no actual rain or snow falling, but the pavements are awash with clammy slush and the air is cold and raw without being invigorating. I had in my pocket a letter confirming my appointment, at three pounds a week, to the staff of the *Headley Chronicle* and I would have changed places and fates with nobody in the wealthy industrial city which that decaying sheet pretended to serve with news and views. I took the exciting missive from my inner breast pocket, and as I walked I savored the inspiration of its envelope. "Francis Gerrard Peyton, Esq." Yes—that, most miraculously, was I. "c/o Messrs. Wilkins, Johnston and Capes, Ltd." Never again would I be "c/o" any firm of importers and general merchants. I had done with that for ever. "Stock Lane, Ladyport." Ladyport had seen the last of me until I returned in triumph.

I opened the letter, keeping one wary eye on my path, lest I fell foul of a lamp-post or cannoned into a passer-by.

"Francis Gerrard Peyton, Esq. Dear Sir." That, again,

was I. Marvelous and magnificent Me! Utterly and wholly excellent Me. Incredible Me. In short—Me.

I read on. "I now confirm our conversation of the 20th inst. and offer you the position of Junior Editorial Assistant to *The Headley Chronicle*. Your salary will be three pounds (£3) per week, and the engagement will be terminable at one month's notice either side. Will you please confirm your acceptance of this offer? I assume that, as stated verbally, you will be able to take up duty with the paper on February 1st. Yours faithfully, John Merry, Editor."

It was true. It was no dream. At last, after five horrid years of servitude to importing and general merchandising, I was now launched on my real career. Five years of free-lancing, with only an occasional acceptance to break the monotony of unsuccess, ended: and a new era opened.

I replaced the letter and took out another, written by someone whose education had never overmastered an innate tendency to spell phonetically, on that cheap and nasty paper which is sold in penny packets.

"22 Prosperity Street, Headley. Mr. Peyton, sir, in reply to your advertisement for rooms I can offer you a good combined room with attendance and board for one pound same to include fires and light or with board and use of sitting room for one pound five good table kept hoping to here from you with best respects Eliza Gallus."

If Prosperity Street lives up to its name, it will be exactly right, I thought, but if it lives down to its neighborhood, it will be exactly wrong.

A friendly policeman had told me to walk on along Battle Road until I passed the Salvation Army Barracks, and Prosperity Street would be the second on my left. I replaced the first epistle of Eliza Gallus to Francis Gerrard Peyton and looked about me.

This ugly red abortion, with imitation battlements, was obviously the Barracks. I passed it and came to

Laidler Street. I was conscious now of the character of the shops. There was a butcher's, with open windows and pieces of meat laid out to collect the dust and grime of Battle Road. There was a small haberdashery, doomed, one sensed it, to chronic insolvency. There was a shop selling sweets, tobacco and periodicals. There was a shop with frosted windows, which announced itself as the "Branch Office of the Lodeshire Mutual Building Society and Assurance Corporation." There was an empty shop. There was a branch of Foote's, the Cash Chemists; an attractive little pastry-cook's, with a window full of balm cakes and tartlets; a rival tobacconist, with a more lurid display of penny dreadfuls and racing tips, but fewer varieties of sweets in the confectionery half of his window, and there was a branch of "The Lodeshire Penny Bank." And then—Prosperity Street.

I turned the corner and surveyed its vista. For half its length the street ran flat, but at the mid-point it rose sharply. Across the upper end ran, as far as I could judge in the now fast gathering gloom of the afternoon, a street of larger and superior, or at least more pretentious, villas. These houses had originally been, I guessed, dwelling places for clerks and the more prosperous artisans. They were built in one monotonous row until a cross street divided them. At the far side of this little break another row began. They were single fronted, and each had three steps to its front door. Half the kitchen window was above foot level, with the veriest mockery of an area and railing before it. Three storeys rose above the street, and one assumed that the front rooms must be deeper than they were broad to be anything better than cupboards. It was clear that no cats were swung in Prosperity Street.

I walked on, past the cross street, where the little dairy stood, and to the foot of the rising half of the road. There I halted, for next door but one to the dairy was Number Twenty-Two. I looked dubiously at its exterior.

The curtains were tolerably clean, and the front window displaying the little oblong card with the word "Apartments" had an air of being slightly ashamed of itself. Down the steep hill children were trying to sledge on soap-boxes and what remained of yesterday's snow. A dog scratched pathetically, with urgent entreaty that threatened to become acute annoyance, at the door of twenty-four. A load of coal was being poured into the coal-hole of the house opposite, from the window of which a little girl looked out. She caught my eye and waved the hand which held the bread and jam that had made her purpled at the mouth. I waved back. It was at worst, I told myself, a friendly neighborhood. Then I knocked valiantly at the knocker of twenty-two.

There was a moment of placid quiet which was ended by a shouting from somewhere below. The shouting became articulate. It was a call for Mary. Mary, I gathered, was absent without leave. There was another moment of quiet, and then a puffing behind the closed door. The lock went back with a wheeze and a groan and the door opened. Standing before me was the fattest woman I have ever seen outside a show. Smiling down at me with infinite friendliness and good humor she puffed and panted, not even attempting to bid me the good day that her nodding head so obviously signaled.

"Good afternoon," I said. "Are you Mrs. Gallus?"

"I am," said she, "but it ought to be Grampus. It's those kitchen stairs. Have you come for the insurance?"

"No. I've come about rooms." I produced her letter.

"Come in, come in," she cried, "I thought you were the new young man from the Prudential."

Her smile was infectious. I denied that I was the new young man from the Prudential and for no reason whatever we stood there laughing with each other, as if her mistake had been the best joke in the world. She wiped a tear of mirth from the corner of her eye with the spotless apron which adorned her ample anatomy.

"Well, well," she said, "it's a poor heart that never rejoices."

* I stepped into the hall and was aware of the rich warm smell of fresh baking. Mrs. Gallus cocked her head like an inquisitive canary and sniffed the air. She threw up her arms.

"Me patty cakes!" she said and turned hastily. The next moment she had disappeared down the stairs into the bowels of the earth, to reappear for a breathless second to bid me follow her.

I went to the stair head and turned a double right angle to descend. The half-submerged kitchen was not the dismal dungeon that I had expected. It was lighted by an ornate chandelier of incandescent gas burners, two of which were burning, and in the big open range a huge coal fire was roaring up the chimney. Mrs. Gallus took up the ends of her apron and extracted a shelf of brown cakes from the oven, examining them critically.

"No harm done," she informed me. "I should say that they're just done to the turn. Sit down while I butter 'em. You'll take a bite of tea with Marion Mary and me, whether you take the rooms or not. I like my bite of tea about four o'clock because when Pa is working, and that isn't often, coz of the asthma, he doesn't get home until half-six, and Mr. Wass, that's my other permanent, comes in about the same time, and Miss Agnew, bless her heart, leaves the art school at six, so that she's here by a quarter past, and we're all a happy fambly, so to speak, and have kidney or liver an' bacon, or a piece of steak from Martin Martlow's, round the corner of Battle Road, next door to Miss Prim's the linen draper, who has the weak lung, you'd see her as you came along, unless you came by Calamity Hill, not that anybody ever does, except the milkman, and only because it's easier for him to run his cart down the top of Prosperity than haul it up, although, of course, he'll have to push it up the next road whichever way he turns, for they all rise, and once Mr.

Wass had two ptarmigan sent to him and I cooked them as if they were chickens, and we had a bottle of that 'Stralian wine from Sharrock's, the grocers, and great doings we had, very jolly that was, but, as I often say, it's a poor heart—here's Marion Mary."

Her quiet monologue had been interrupted by the slamming of the hall door above us. There was a patter of feet down the kitchen stairs and a girl of about fourteen burst in on us. She was her mother's daughter, with the same smooth rosy cheeks, the same ready grin of welcome for a stranger, the same air of finding life mildly exciting and wholly pleasant. She was plump where her mother was undisguisably fat, and while Mrs. Gallus moved with that surprising lightness and grace that so often amazes me in fat people, Marion Mary was quick and bouncing. There was a difference in the molding of the forehead and in the line of the chin, and these things I took to be Pa's contribution to Marion Mary's attractive comeliness.

She stood smiling at me with a red tam-o'-shanter dangling in her hand and her rich hair tumbling all about her shoulders.

"Hullo," she said, "are you to be the new permanent?"

"I don't know yet," I told her. Her mother relieved what, to me—for I was still touched with the ingenuousness of extreme youth for all my twenty-two years—was an embarrassing encounter.

"Come on now, child, and be getting up three chairs or the cakes will be spoilt on us. Here's the tea massed," she flourished a big family teapot or brown mug with which she had been busy as she talked, "and we've a lick of cream enough for the three of us, so if anybody else drops in they'll have to make out with skim, not that that'll be a great hardship, but there's no denying that a spot of cream makes all the difference to a cup of tea, I like to see it float up to the top, for it's everyone to

his taste, as I often say, and those that like something different are welcome to it. . . . ”

Marion Mary flung her tam on to the dresser and pulled up three chairs trailing to the table.

“And now Mr——” said Mrs. Gallus with a positive intonation of triumphant appetite.

“My name is Peyton,” I told her, taking my place at her right hand as she poured out.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world that I should be about to eat a meal with these two strangers whom I had not seen ten minutes before. About Mrs. Gallus was a cosmic savor, as if she had been born in the morning of the world and had stayed unchanged, welcoming strangers to her table and filling her daughter with hot cakes and strawberry jam. She was compounded of motherliness and camaraderie, and one forgot that she was a fat woman in an apron, and realized that she was Artemis in exile.

“But you’ll be the gentleman from Ladyport who advertised for rooms in the *Chronicle*, I might have guessed it, but my mind was on the patty cakes, and expecting the new insurance man, the old collector having laid off with very close veins, as Pa calls ’em, being fond of his joke, well here you are, and ready for a bite, I’ll warrant, if you’ve traveled from the West coast, or perhaps you had some dinner in the town, but no matter, the walk up will have left you cold and hungry, unless you came on the tram, and that’d be worse, for of all the draughty wagons these Headley trams beat anything I ever knew, help Mr. Peyton to the jam, Marion Mary, you’ll find strawberry on these hot cakes is a touch of heaven to a hungry tongue, very scrumptious, though I say it who shouldn’t, but I was well taught in my girlhood days for my mother was a first-class cook in a gentleman’s house, though she did come down to keeping a company house at Filey, and not a very good company house at that, for some of those big establishments are run by ladies and

gentlemen who make a fortune out of them, but I wasn't going to be a cook, I took to the boards, and I might have been touring yet but for Pa's asthma, for we had a fit-up of our own, nothing elegant like Irving and Terry, you know, but good, oh very good, *Maria Marten of the Red Barn* and *Eugene Aram*, and *East Lynne*, and a drama that Pa wrote for himself called *The Coiner's Sweetheart*, I was her, and he was the young coastguard that she married in the last act with a tableau and young Jimmy Dilk imitating church bells off on a row of bottles with string round their necks, very clever Jimmy was and not a bit spoilt for all that he's sometimes bottom of the bill to-day, but only in the smalls, he's glad enough to be in the middle at the big houses, but he never misses coming up to see us when he's in Headley, rare talks we have about old times, very fond of rum, Jimmy is, and allus brings a bottle up for Pa and me, not that I like the stuff very much, though I take a drop "hot-with," just for company's sake, so to speak, for it's a poor heart that never rejoices, like Mr. Wass and the red wine that he's so fond of, called Burgundy I think it is, bottled stout is good enough for me, I say, but everyone to his own tippie, have another cup of tea, and don't be afraid of the cakes, they're pure and sweet like the label on that woman's pickles that always amuses Pa so, and they'd do nobody harm, not even a tender infant. . . ."

As she talked on we ate steadily, for I was hungry, and the warm fire and the snug clean kitchen with its big dresser and the brass pans on the mantel, induced an almost rural feeling of zest. Marion Mary munched away with no eyes for her mother, to whose endless soothing talk she had long since ceased to respond, but with a twinkling regard for me, who sat opposite to her at the big table. I felt that I was indeed the new permanent, and wondered who might emerge to claim the names that Mrs. Gallus had spoken, what manner of man was this Mr. Wass with his fondness for Burgundy and his occasional

presents of ptarmigan, what manner of woman the Miss Agnew whose heart Mrs. Gallus so fervently blessed, what manner of consort Pa, who had asthma and didn't work often in consequence.

§ 3

After we had eaten to repletion, and I had begun to wonder how on earth Mrs. Gallus and her chubby daughter managed to face the "famby meal at half six," Marion Mary showed me the combined room. It was at the top of the house and we ascended the first flight like fauns, the second flight like two normal young humans, but the third flight like weary mountaineers, for the architect had economized space by throwing up the stairs at the steepest angle he could conceive without making them absolutely perpendicular. Their very steepness tempted one to take them at a run. It was no wonder that fat Mrs. Gallus had come puffing and panting to the door.

The room itself was unexpectedly spacious. It contained an iron bedstead; a dressing-table in walnut, one leg of which was shorn up by a splint of ordinary firewood lashed with string; a chest of drawers in imitation oak, with the deal showing through where the stain had worn thin; a table under the window, at which I would write; a couch of black horsehair; one easy chair in a patterned velvet; another easy chair in basket work; one ordinary kitchen chair; a picture of Mr. Wilson Barrett, the actor, as Marcus; a picture of Miss Lily Bandman as Mercia; a picture of Niagara Falls in crude colors; a framed play bill announcing Mr. J. L. Toole in a new comedy; a small plaster cast of a gentleman in a long frock coat, which stood on the mantelshelf in company with one badly-cracked vase and an empty jam jar; a wall cupboard about two feet by three; a hanging bamboo bookcase that looked desperately unsafe; an ottoman covered in faded chintz; and a very ornate chamber pot which obtruded itself shamelessly from under the

valance of the bed, and which Marion Mary with superb unconcern, but to my intense embarrassment, kicked casually out of sight as she passed it, where for an interminable moment it emphasized its protesting presence by emitting a dull, hollow, booming ring.

Marion Mary was nothing if not frank. She drew the curtains back, to allow what little light remained to filter into the room, applied a match to the incandescent gas, and then informed me that it was really an attic, but a very good attic.

Genius had found its garret!

"Miss Agnew has the back attic, coz it has a skylight that is good for painting," my cicerone informed me.

I sauntered round the four walls. The gentleman in the long frock coat of plaster revealed himself surprisingly as Goethe.

"Mr. Raniker left that," said Marion Mary.

"Oh," I said.

"He was our last permanent. He's gone to London. That's a statue of a German poet called Gerty. Dotty about him, Mr. Raniker was. He used to spout him to us at supper, and Pa would spout Shakespeare, and Mr. Wass would spout somebody else whose name I forget. They *were* funny, all three spouting at once like whales throwing out a stream of long words. I wanted to shout 'There She Blows' many a time. Only I didn't dare."

The only difference, I saw, between the conversational technique of Mrs. Gallus and her child was that Marion Mary used all the full stops for which her mother had no use. She shot out her sentences and then paused for an appreciable period of time, so that one never knew when she had finished her contribution to the communal talk.

"We had a real dotty one once. But he didn't stay. We didn't know at first. How could we? He looked all right. He talked all right. Ma found him one night just going out into the street with no clothes on trying to balance an ash-tray full of cinders on his head. Said he was Solomon

Eagle. I learnt about him at school. Ma said that he ought to go back for his bathing drawers. And he went. Quiet as a lamb. Then Ma locked him in and sent Pa for a policeman. And next day they took him away. I don't know what happened to him. He was a nice man, too. Old, you know, with a bald head, but nice. The ash-tray must have scratched him, for he was all shiny on top. Mr. Raniker came after that. Will you take it?"

I was under some mystic compulsion, but I temporized. I said that I'd like to see the sitting-room.

"That's five shillings extra, because of the inconvenience, but there's a piano."

As we went down the stairs I saw that if I replaced the vanished Raniker, whom I visualized as a dark and saturnine young disciple of Carlyle, there would be many days when the talk of Ma Gallus would be a weariness and the camaraderie of the household would be an annoyance, but I knew that I would stay. There was a friendliness in the air, a welcoming, a sense of home-coming, that drew me irresistibly. I felt, too, that I must see with my mortal eyes both Mr. Wass and Miss Agnew. Those of whom Ma Gallus thought so highly must, I told myself, be of uncommon mettle.

We came to the sitting-room. This was smaller by the breadth of the little hall than my proposed bedroom. Like every room in the house it was scrupulously clean. The brass fender shone and the mirrored overmantel flashed. The chairs and the sideboard and the table had been polished with enthusiasm, and the mere thought of the room brings back to my nostrils the mingled odor of furniture cream, metal polish, and daffodils. It was not that there was any obtrusive tidiness. Tidiness and the Gallus household were incompatible. It was that the whole place sang of an honest lust for cleanliness. I have come to imagine that the years which Ma and Pa Gallus spent in their caravan fit-up had inculcated this passion for almost blatant cleanliness, for the outside of their moving

home was, as it were, their main advertisement and token of prosperity, and the inside would have become quickly uninhabitable had it not been assaulted with brooms and dusters on every available opportunity.

No—there was no obtrusive tidiness. The first thing Marion Mary did after lighting the gas was to retrieve a silk hat which had rolled into the center of the startling hearth rug, and to gather up from one of the two easy chairs two volumes of a self-educator and a ball of darning wool.

"This is it," she said. "It's a nice room in the evening, but most of us sit in the kitchen coz the fire's bigger. Sometimes Mr. Wass plays on the piano and sometimes Miss Agnew does. All those photographs are Ma and Pa in the old days. Except some of other people. That plate with a tex' on it is mine. Miss Philipson gave it to me. Ma says it gives her the creeps." She looked at the old-fashioned plaque reflectively and read off the text. "'Thou God seest me.' It is rather creepy, come to think of it. That's why Pa wouldn't let me have it in the bedroom, like Miss Philipson said. I don't suppose He does see you really. I mean really see you. He'll see into you, or through you. If He does see you He mustn't half laugh most of the time. I should. I have to laugh now sometimes, people are so funny. You should see Pa in his bare skin. I don't mean all in his bare skin, but with some of him bare, coming from the bathroom. We've got a nice bathroom."

There was the sound of a laboring Ma Gallus reaching the head of the kitchen stairs. She came in, still beaming with universal beatitude.

"Well?" she said.

"I'll take it, Mrs. Gallus, with use of the sitting-room, if you'll have me."

"Of course we'll have you. I knew you and me would get on together as soon as I saw you smiling on the step. What about moving in?"

"All my traps are in the left luggage office. I'd better go down for them and bring them in a cab."

"There's no call to do that. Little Miss Popplewell's brother at the dairy has a light cart." She was still panting from her ascent. I waited for the full stops to cease and the free flow of talk to resume. "He does light carting as a kind of paying 'obby, and he'll soon whip 'em up for you, Marion Mary go you round to Miss Popplewell and ask if her brother's free, and if he is ask him to come with his cart and Mr. Paynim can send for his luggage."

I had taken out the silver sovereign-purse of which I was inordinately proud as the symbol of my adult status and I slipped two golden pounds from it.

"I'd like to pay a week in advance," I said.

"Only if you'd rather," she said, wiping her hands on the broad white apron before taking the money.

"I'd rather," I assured her. I was struck with a happy idea. "And, Mrs. Gallus, would you spend five shillings of the change on a little something extra for supper, so that I can pay my footing?"

"Oh, but, Mr. Paynim. . . ."

"But, I'd like to."

"Well then you shall. What shall it be? We were going to have sheep's-head broth, and the head to pick after it, and a bit of apple pie with some cheese, but perhaps if I got in some fat sausages and made mashed potatoes, and two jumbos of bottled table ale, and some apples for sauce, for I always say that apple-sauce is the best part of the sausages, we could have the broth first, and it'd be a fine swagger four course meal, or five with the cheese, and I'd get Pa one of those thrippeny Marcella cigars that he's so fond of to smoke afterwards, and it might run to a quarter of mixed chocolates for Miss Agnew and me and Marion Mary to round off with, for there's nothing like a sweet chocolate after a meal to settle the digestion, although some do hold, I know, with a pinch of bicarbonate, nasty stuff, oh, and we can get a bottle of

peppermint cordial from old Mr. Stitch the herbalist, and have it hot instead of the ale for those who like it."

"Oh, Mrs. Gallus, there's one thing I forgot to say. I have to work at night. I'm a journalist, you see." (I couldn't have announced my Messiahship with greater pride.) "I should have to have a latch key, for I shan't be in until nearly three in the morning."

"That will be all right, I had a journalist once before, Mr. Raniker, who had your room, he was on the *Lode-shire News*, but now he's gone to London, he had his breakfast at eleven off a tray, two boiled eggs and toast with Hartley's marmalade, no other brand, you should have heard him the day we only had Golden Shred, but all in good humor, for he was a real gentleman for all that he was a nostic, which means that you don't believe anything you can't prove, which always seemed to me to be putting your own poor thinking machine on a level with the Almighty, but everybody to his taste I always say."

"That would suit me. I'm not an agnostic, so any brand of marmalade will do for me. But I'd like a little bacon some days, if I might."

"Whatever you've a mind to, Mr. Paynim. With three permanents and Pa doing a bit now and again we've no cause to stint our stomachs, have we, not that I'm a guzzling one, heaven knows, but it's a poor heart that hasn't a decent appetite to keep it beating, and many a young man, I often think, has gone into a decline through not being properly nourished, and I don't think Pa would have this asthma if his mother had fed him better as a boy, but of course they had to keep them small and slight, being acrobats by profession and not, as you might say, legitimate, I mean in the theatrical sense, for Pa was born in holy Matlock, as he says, being a great one to joke, and his mother one of the best women who ever entered the profession, although she got struck with religious mania towards the end, when I knew her, and fell in with an old evangelist after her old man died by fall-

ing from the roof of Hengler's when he had a temporary job, coz one of the real trapezists had sprained his ankle jumping on to a bus at the corner of Hyde Park, being, I should think, half drunk, although he'd be none the worse for that, it's only when they come home fighting mad and get into bed in their boots, which most don't, being more liable to strip themselves naked at the foot of the stairs and catch their deaths of cold, all for the sake of missing a curtain lecture, but I always maintain that it's the wife who's to blame, but give her her due she brought Pa up well and educated him proper, except for keeping him slight, which I swear to this day laid the seeds of asthma in him, for all that he was so handsome, even if small, I being partial to small men, being, as you might say, on the large side myself."

The relief force from this beleaguering of talk came in the person of Marion Mary, who announced the almost immediate arrival of Miss Popplewell's brother with his cart. To him, when he came, I rendered up my cloak-room tickets, and before six he was back with my trunk, my Gladstone bag, my box of books, and the two big parcels that made up all my worldly goods. I unpacked in my room, washed in the bathroom of which Marion Mary was so proud, and prepared to descend and face the ordeal of supper. In the next room, the back attic with the skylight, someone was moving. I stood with my hand on the handle of my own door for a barely perceptible second of natural eavesdropping. A girl's voice began to sing, and in a sudden fit of absolute shyness and fright I dashed quickly down the stairs. On the next landing a man's voice was also singing, a deep baritone voice, trolling out "And loud shall shine great Britain's bays, As in King George's golden days." It struck me that bays could not shine loudly, but I could not recall the right words. This was evidently Mr. Wass, and if he sang Sullivan while he made his toilet I was prepared to like him, for I, also, did that.

I went down the next flight and timidly entered the sitting-room. It was empty. I sat down and looked at the assortment of books in the one glass-fronted bookcase. There was the rest of the self-educator, two volumes of Dickens, a rather battered copy of *Pendennis*, a *John Halifax, Gentleman*, two volumes of *Household Words* and one of a missionary magazine, a yellow-backed French novel with no title on its shoulders but the word Paris in faded gilt at the foot, a life of Kean, three books purporting to be portraits of all the celebrities of the day, a life of John Wesley, Drummond's *Natural Law in the Spiritual World*, Huxley's Essays, an old volume of Newman's University sermons, a guide to the stage, a book of *Politeness and Deportment* by a Member of the House of Lords, some plays in paper covers with the threads showing through the shouldering, a paper-backed *Woman in White*, a Bible, and *What Daisy Did at School*.

As I surveyed this motley crew I was aware of yet another vocalist below stairs. I listened intently to catch the song. I had come, it seemed, into a nest of singing birds.

As I listened I heard Pa Gallus somewhat wheezily announcing that he was king of the for-r-r-r-r-est glade, king of the for-r-r-r-est glade, king-g-g-g-g of the for-r-r-r-r-est glade. His song was broken by another voice which in a high female shriek called "Supper." From upstairs the man's baritone and the girl's contralto responded, "Coming!"

I stayed until I heard them going down, and then I too descended.

CHAPTER TWO

I

I WRITE at a large and most imposing desk. In the next room secretaries are busy. In the hall, human watchdogs keep me from interruption. If my gaze wanders from the writing paper it falls on autographed photographs of Ministers of State or Royal personages, or looks through the big window to that little patch of trodden grass and meager trees which Downing Street calls a garden. On that very patch of earth Disraeli must often have walked musing on his strange career. Salisbury must have pondered there the possibility of forgetting Randolph and getting away to the laboratory at Hatfield; and Gladstone must have paced in argument with John Morley. Groups of Imperial delegates and Foreign Notabilities have grouped themselves there to be photographed, and Megan Lloyd George has laughed where Catherine Gladstone talked sedately and Mary Anne prattled to Dizzy. I am conscious of the circumstances and trappings of success, of the pledges and surroundings of greatness. Everything conspires to make me vividly aware of the present.

But the past returns. I have only to close my eyes, and I see them as I saw them first, that night thirty years ago. It seems a lifetime ago, and yet strangely recent. What, after all, is time? The past, I say, returns, and I am tempted to abandon this attempt to recapture it in more tangible form than a busy man's reverie. I become conscious of nothing but a great readiness to give up everything that I have won, if only I may have in return that boy of twenty-two, standing in the doorway of a cellar kitchen in Prosperity Street, courting but fearing—fearing acutely—the welcome of three strangers and a fat landlady.

As I came shyly to the door they were grouped in char-

acteristic poses. Mrs. Gallus was bent over the hob, doing something miraculous to a steaming cauldron of sheep's-head broth. Marion Mary was prodding sausages with a fork as they lay in the frying pan. On the hearth rug, very much in the way, Peter Wass was laying down the law to Pa Gallus, who balanced himself on his heels with his hands under the tails of his absurd frock coat and his chest thrown out like a pouter pigeon. And Joan Agnew was peeping into the little cracked mirror that hung at the side of the dresser settling a bow of riband to her satisfaction.

I coughed, and they all looked at me, except Ma Gallus, who went on with her magic at the cauldron.

"It's Mr. Peyton, the new permanent," said Marion Mary, waving to me with a sausage which was impaled on the fork she held.

Pa Gallus came forward. Dear man, it is a shame to laugh at him, for the long accretions of affectation which the years of mumming had made second nature really expressed a soul great with courtesy and a heart heavy with kindness.

He was a man of very few inches, a bare five feet two, I should say, but with a noble head. He waddled and strutted alternately on his short legs, but he carried his chin well up and his adequate gestures somehow gave him a savor of magnificence. He had a habit of puckering up his eyes, whether from short sight or in imitation of some dramatic idol I never knew, and he wore his hair very long, in the best theatrical tradition. His voice was deep and he rolled his r's horrifically. I was to learn that his vocabulary was extraordinary in its range, but on that first evening it seemed to be composed of all the dramatic clichés in creation. He was dressed in a light gray frock coat, such as doctors used to affect; a pair of exceedingly shabby check trousers; a yellow waistcoat of some washable material, which had wrinkled with long use, but which showed no speck or stain to fret the eye of her

who so evidently made herself responsible for its cleanliness; a large and aggressive Gladstone collar with a cravat big enough for a ship's fender, into which a pin was thrust leaving exposed a head, set in brilliants, the shape of a rapier hilt. His left hand gripped a multicolored kerchief, which he was wont to flourish as he talked, to the imminent danger of his interlocutor, whose eyes were perpetually threatened by the lash of the silk as it whipped through the air.

"Sir," he said, like some echo from Boswell, "we are glad to welcome you under our roof. We are happy to have you at our humble board. We look forward to bettering your acquaintance. And—er—I understand we are indebted to your sense of fitness for an addition to our family meal."

I bowed awkwardly, for he would have made even the Member of the House of Lords whose book on Politeness and Deportment was upstairs feel gauche and awkward. I murmured something about paying my footing.

"Sir," he responded, with a bow which made mine by comparison seem an ungracious nod, "you are good-hearted. You keep the customs of kindness. You may not climb high, Sir, but you shall never lack friends. Permit me—Mr.—er—"

"Peyton," I prompted.

"Mr. Peyton, permit me. Miss Agnew, may I present Mr. Peyton? Mr. Peyton—Miss Agnew."

Miss Agnew smiled bewitchingly and nodded a cheerful, friendly greeting as she held out her hand. I took her long artist's fingers between my own and stammered some form of words. I was, I knew, blushing like a schoolboy. To all intents and purposes, I *was* a schoolboy. My swaggerings in the hotels of Ladyport, my brave doings on holidays and high days these last five years, my feats of rhetoric in the Parliamentary Debating Society, my gallant affairs with the Scots girl in the tobacconist's

and Miss Sloan in the Silver Grill, my passion for Miss Irene Vanbrugh, fed by long range adoration from the pit and gallery—these availed me nothing now. Joan told me afterwards, long afterwards, that I seemed to her to be composed and quite master of the moment, and that she it was who was flustered and perturbed. I do not know how it was with her, but for me, I was shy to the verge of panic.

Pa Gallus boomed on.

"Mr. Peyton, your fellow lodger, a kindred sojourner, your brother of the table round, Mr. Wass, Mr. Peter Wass. Gentlemen, know each other. Mr. Wass—Mr. Peyton. Mr. Peyton—Mr. Wass."

Peter Wass leaned over the supper table and took my hand in his firm grip. Old Peter, that we called Sinbad! To know him was to love him. Sir Peter Wass, now, with the Parliament Houses of two Dominions to his architectural credit; but plain Peter in those days, sitting in an office in Headley waiting for commissions, and owing Ma and Pa Gallus for a week or two's board and lodging. Peter, with his sudden moods of Imperial extravagance and his expensive tastes, his days of severe self-discipline and rigid economy, his alternate fits of careless abandon and earnest application. Well—Peter to-day can afford to be Imperial in his magnificence. His imperturbable man, Brewster, would for once be stirred to visible emotion if Peter bundled up his second best trousers and his camera and popped them for what they would fetch in order to stand cheap Burgundy for a Saturday night supper party. But once upon a time——!

Peter took my hand over the table, with Pa Gallus blessing us in dumb show, as if he had just reconciled Cain and Abel or Jacob and Esau, while Joan Agnew smiled at us, and Ma Gallus turned with the broth safely decanted into its tureen, and Marion Mary adjusted the pan of sausages carefully to the blaze that they might be ready at the right moment.

It is surprising how little detail I can remember of that initial supper. I recall the hot peppery quality of the sheep's-head broth; the spluttering sausages with Ma's beloved apple sauce; the pie that followed, "hotted up" and with a ration of cream from Miss Popplewell's dairy; the imitation gorgonzola cheese, which Peter told us was faked into green ripeness by the plunging into it of hot copper wires; the pickled onions from the large stone jar; and the clean bitterness of the table ale in the two monstrously big bottles.

I recall, too, odd snatches of the talk. Mrs. Popplewell, mother of the lame girl, was, I remember, a topic that engaged attention, for Mrs. Popplewell had somehow aroused the ire of Pa Gallus, who said, in manly fashion, that he who laid his hands on a woman except in kindness was a foul currrr, but that if ever a man had been exasperated to the point of chastising a grown woman he was that man. His wrath inspired Ma Gallus to a reminiscence of how she was once the object of a Living Skeleton's affections, which led to her adventure with the Dog-faced boy from the next caravan the first night she essayed Ophelia in a shortened version of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, which Pa Gallus had cut unmercifully, to its great improvement, which led in turn to the tale of Pa Gallus and Sir Henry Irving, which reminded her of an encounter with a jelly fish at a sea-side resort. . . . Peter, I remember, was pleased to review at length the shortcomings of the City Fathers of Headley, that thriving manufacturing township which, in his opinion, was a festering sore on the fair face of Lodeshire, a disgrace to human effort, and a blot on Western civilization. . . . Marion Mary told us in short jerks the pathetic history of her friend Lizzie Golightly, whose tonsils, it appeared, had recently been removed, and who was now working as a sempstress when she really wanted to be a

pupil teacher and wasn't it too bad. . . . Joan, I fancy, said very little, and I said practically nothing at all. I know that in the intervals of Pa Gallus's just annoyance with the exasperating Mrs. Popplewell and Peter's anger with the City Fathers we laughed a good deal.

But it is Joan who fills my memory, Joan with her delicate beauty, her eager, mirthful eyes, her silken and rebellious hair, her proud little chin, her sweet mouth. She was like some study in pastel. I was an etching, Peter was a woodcut, and the three Gallus's were broad studies in thick oils—but Joan was pastel. Gold and cream and pink, she was; but not doll-like or fragile. She was radiant with well-being, zestful and eupeptic. When she stood up, her figure was as firm as a boy's, and her movements as lithe. When she spoke, her contralto seemed charged with ineffable significances. When she laughed, it was with clean mirth. By what odd twists and turns of fortune she came to be alone in this galley I did not know. I only knew that her presence redeemed the kitchen where we sat from all sordidness and vulgarity, and that by her magic all base things were transmuted and made noble. I was, you see, very much a boy.

§ 3

A heavy tea of patty cakes and rich jam followed within two hours by a heavier supper is apt to make a man conscious of his interior economy. As Peter and I climbed the stairs, he filling his pipe contentedly from a sealskin pouch, I announced my intention of taking a walk. He looked at a watch that lay chainless in a waistcoat pocket.

"Eight o'clock. I'll come with you. Shall we take Jimbo?"

"Is that the dog?"

"Goo' lord, no. It's Joan."

"Miss Agnew. Would she come?"

"Like a shot, I expect. Jimbo!"

Joan was lingering over the chocolates with Ma Gallus and Marion Mary.

"Ye—es!" she trilled back.

"Coming out?"

Joan appeared at the foot of the stairs, looking up at us.

"Where to?"

"Oh, anywhere. Peyton wants to explore the neighborhood."

"Right-oh."

"Buck up, then."

She followed us into the hall.

"Got any money, Sinbad?" she asked.

"Five bob and some coppers. Do you want any?"

"No. I've got some."

"Then what game?"

"I thought we might buy Ma Gallus that egg poaching thing that she's so cracked about. It's only eighteen pence."

"All right. I don't mind. Ninepence each."

I was standing by and took my courage in both hands.

"I say," I said, "couldn't I give sixpence?"

"But dash it," said Sinbad, "you stood the sosingers and the other things."

"But I'd like to feel really one of the family, if you'd let me. . . ."

"What do you say, Jimbo?"

"If you really want to. . . ."

"I'd like to."

"All right. Sixpence each. Let's go and buy it straight away."

We took down our coats and hats from the pegs in the hall, and went out.

"Tanners up," said Joan, on the doorstep. We fumbled for our money in the light of the street lamp and produced the sixpences.

Nowadays, when all our girls are emancipated, Joan

would cause me no surprise, but then, when the great emergence was unthought of, save by an odd girl here and there, she was something utterly new in my experience. She comported herself like some boy who had strayed from his art class, using our own idiom without affectation, but losing nothing of her exquisite femininity. I wondered if she might smoke in the privacy of her own room. In those days the cigarette was the Jolly Roger of the female rebel.

"I got another order to-day," she informed us.

"Oh, good. Who from?"

"Madam Hester. You know, the little Irish woman who has the shop in Ebor Street."

She was, I learnt, alone in the world, and earned her living by teaching design two days a week at the local art school and doing designing for local traders and others as she could secure commissions. There was a tragedy somewhere in her history, a tragedy which was not revealed, but which had brought her three years before, when she was seventeen, seeking shelter for a few nights under the roof of 22 Prosperity Street. There she had stayed, using what little money she had to complete her training and afterwards earning sufficient to keep herself, if not in luxury, at least in some security. She was an omnivorous reader, and that night as we walked, a happy trio, about the mean streets we talked books.

There will never be anything to equal those rioting talks of youth, when new authors are seizing the mind and new works are going to the head like wine. Heaven knows our critical standards must have been unorthodox and our judgment a little prone to be influenced by considerations other than canons of exact literary merit, but it seemed as we chattered that we were finding a host of common acquaintances, familiarity with whom increased our sense of long standing friendship. I rejoiced that Joan and I had much the same taste. Her ambition to become a great painter had helped to reveal Browning to her,

and him she used to quote glibly and with zest. She read Dickens with enthusiasm, for she had a bubbling humor and a keen sense of the grotesque, and her appetite for minor verse seemed to have been insatiable. They were both flatteringly excited to learn of the job of work that had brought me to Headley. To be a professional journalist was much, but to be an accredited editorial assistant was immediate fame beyond all words enviable. We still, you see, thought of journalists as literary men controlling events. My predecessor, the Goethe-reading Raniker, had been a sub-editor, and him they had regarded with some awe. But I—I was to be removed from the ruck of sub-editors and was actually to write leaders and make my force felt on affairs and deliver judgments and appraise books . . . Their free gratification at my good luck fed my own towering sense of magnificent achievement. I aped an unnatural modesty to hide an inhuman egotism. We joked about a future when we should all three be great, when portraits of Sinbad and me by Joan would cause the Academy to be a wedge of worshiping humanity, when my books would influence nations, and Peter would be acknowledged as the master builder of this or any age. We sniffed up the coming days of unrestrained public adulation and crowned effort as we looked into the dingy windows of little shops or halted for a moment to savor the blare and stir of a Salvation Army band marching back to the red brick barracks.

"If ever I *am* great and famous," said Joan, for the first time implying any doubt in the prospect, "I shall leave my studio in Venice and my little house in Sussex and my house in Town, and I shall come back to Prosperity Street for a week, and I shall spend every evening wandering about these jolly little shops. I shall buy the second-hand camera and the set of Gibbon from the broker, and some sticky sweets from the sweet shop, and an armful of penny dreadfuls, and some imitation lace from Miss Prim, and some cold roast pork with crack-

ling, and that ripping stationery rack at seven and six from Mayblin's, and the Chinaman with the nodding head from Heppel's, and a beautiful picture of our good Queen handing a Bible to a nigger king like that horrible thing in Wadeson's window."

"Whatever for?"

"Just to feel that I am able to do all the things the neighbors want to do and can't."

"Nasty wretch!"

"But wait—when I've done that, at the end of the week I'll hire the Wesleyan schoolroom and summon everyone to the feast and there'll be a present for everybody out of my purchases. . . ."

"Ah—ah! Little Lady Bountiful has returned. How sweet a nature! Now I"—Sinbad paused reflectively—"I shall drive along Battle Road in a glossy silk hat and a big fur-lined coat, and as I go I shall distribute largesse to the admiring mob. When I come to the corner I shall climb down from my elaborate carriage, I shall enter with characteristic dignity and bonhomie the Salvation Army Barracks, and I shall say to the man in charge 'Sir, here are some plans for a new citadel and to-morrow five hundred workmen will start to rebuild at my expense.' Waving away all signs of gratitude I shall return to my carriage, distribute some more largesse, and disappear in the gathering dusk. The poor souls attracted to salvation by the imposing edifice will linger at the penitent bench to bless the name of their unknown benefactor. Who knows—I may become a tribal deity. I shall fade to a semimyth and legends will grow about me. . . ."

"What idiots we are," said Joan. "I don't suppose we shall ever think of Prosperity Street twenty years hence."

"We may be living in it," said Sinbad, glumly, having dropped to earth.

"We might be living in a worse place," I commented.

§ 4

When we reached No. 22, it was in darkness save for the cellar kitchen, where through the curtain we could see the fire leaping in the light of the incandescent mantels. Having taken off our coats and hats we descended to see who was astir. Ma Gallus rocked herself amiably in the big rocking-chair and her spouse was writing somewhat painfully in a penny exercise book.

"Ready for a cup of cocoa? I'll mix it," said our hostess yawning and preparing to heave herself from the ease into which she had sunk.

"I'll do it," said Joan. "Don't you move."

She busied herself with paraphernalia from the cupboard. Sinbad sat down by the fireplace, filling his pipe. I took the chair at the head of the table.

Pa looked up from his writing.

"I hear that you are—er—a knight of the pen, a literary man. We must converse together when occasion offers. I, too . . ." he waved his exercise book at me. "Three tragedies, five comedies, a farce, and countless adaptations. I was foolish. Foolish. I was jealous of the great and growing reputation of my own little theatre. I would not let the managers approach me. I said, the work is mine and the production is mine, and the satisfaction of the achievement is mine. It was shortsighted. I admit it. When the day came when my fortunes had—er—waned I had estranged those of the profession who could have saved me from the descent to this miserrrrable hovel in which we children of calamity are forced to endure the wearrrry days of grinding penurrrry. If my plays went to one manager, they went to dozens. With what result? Unrrrrread, Sir. Unrrrrread." He drew back the leonine head and puckered his eyes, as if to gauge the effect upon me of such a revelation of human duplicity. "The name of Garrick Gallus upon the title page was enough. They sent back the manuscripts unrrrrread or

they destrrrroyed them. The dirty scoundrels destrroyed them, Sir. Was I discouraged? No, Sir. A little disheartened, perhaps, a little disappointed—but not disheartened to the point of discouragement. Not cast down to the depth of despair. Not—” his voice had deepened into an authentic tone of tragedy. In another moment we should have been in for it. A voice from the rocking-chair checked him in full stride.

“Now, Pa, don’t take on so, you know you told me that this new one would make up for all, your very words, and that once this was played there would be such a demand for others that we shouldn’t have to worry, although I was never one to worry without cause, not even when Lord Percy spoilt the ducks when I was fifteen and Ma had left me in the kitchen, and of course not knowing any better I expected that I should be blamed and Ma dismissed, terribly afraid of being dismissed those maids were, I often think that was what drove me to the boards, for whatever you say domestic service is a precarious profession for a young girl, in one place one day and another the next and no saying what kind of people, now the stage is all nice and natty, as the saying goes. . . .”

Joan bore round the cups of cocoa. Cocoa! How I have come to abominate the stuff, and what nectar it seemed then.

She took a chair next to mine.

“Is this the new comedy, Mr. Gallus?” she asked.

“It is, me dearrr. I have just been adding a few touches to the second act. It is good, I think, good. The singing soubrette should fetch them.” He turned to me. “I have no use for these newfangled ideas about playwriting. Give me the limitations of the older school and I will show you what an artist can do. A heavy, a juvenile, a light lead, a second lead, two comic reliefs, a singing soubrette for chambermaid’s part, and a few supers. Pinero, Jones, Sims—pshaw! Bunglers, Sir, bunglers. A venal

and corrupt management and a public that tolerates exploitation."

Marion Mary came down the stairs. Her father eyed her more in sorrow than anger.

"Child, how often have I told you to enter with grace. That bounding manner does not become you. When you were a child—yes. Freshness, spontaneity, inconsequence. But now—on the verge of womanhood, 'Where brook and river meet.' Elegance, charm, deportment!"

"Sorry, Pa."

"Did you see Mrs. Winterbottom?" asked her mother.

"Yes, Ma. And Mr. Winterbottom is no better, but hopes to be about for the Bainbridge Plate. His voice is something awful. Can't hear half he says. He'll never be able to shout the odds again. Aspasia Winterbottom says she's not going back to school, coz she's found a place in an auction, handing people parcels and such-like. Five bob a week, she's to have."

"'Oh, God!'" said Pa Gallus in a voice of such profound despair that we all jumped round to look at him. Having caught our eyes he continued. "'Oh, God! that bread should be so dear, and human lives so cheap.'" He replaced the agonized frown that disfigured him by a cheery smile. "Tom Hood," he explained brightly. Mrs. Gallus went off into one of her peals of easy laughter.

"I thought it was colic," she said. "You shouldn't startle people like that, Pa, supposin' Mr. Paynim had a weak heart, he might have collapsed where he sits."

"Five shillings a week—for a young girl's body and soul. Aspasia Winterbottom, that delicate flower, handing people parcels. There is something rotten in the State of Denmark. A prettier child you never saw—except, perhaps, Marion Mary as an infant—and now. . . ." He waved his arms. I wondered to what depths he would have been plunged had Aspasia Winterbottom actually been the victim of some foul seducer.

Sinbad finished his cocoa and stood up.

"Saturday to-morrow, thank heavens. I won't be going to the office, Mrs. Gallus."

"How would you all three like your breakfasts together at ten?"

"Splendid," said Joan. "We'll have poached eggs on toast."

"Have you seen," said Ma Gallus, "that specially made three egg poacher in Handeyside's? It's marvelous what they think of, you pop the thing into a pan of water and do three eggs and out they come all nice and neat, it's a great labor saver to say nothing of getting them all piping hot without one waiting for the others and the egg going cold."

"Is it anything like this?" asked the first conspirator producing our purchase.

It was exactly like that, and we were silly children to waste our money on it, but wasn't it a marvelous invention. . . . It was with the greatest difficulty that we escaped having eggs poached then and there in order that its use might be demonstrated and its efficacy explored. I have seen diamonds worth a prince's ransom received with less honest gratitude and less obvious pleasure than that eighteen pennyworth of twisted wire and hammered tin. We fled to the upper room to avoid her commingled thanks and approving comments.

It was barely half-past nine and Sinbad sat down at the tiny little piano to play for us.

"I'm glad you don't laugh at them," said Joan.

"Laugh at them!" I answered. "Why I love them. They're like pleased, contented children. Even his dark suspicions about managers are only a boy's make-believe. I suppose they have no real security, and yet here they are in this mean street, simply brimming over with happiness and friendliness and all the primal virtues."

"They've no sense of values. I'm sure that some weeks Ma loses money on us. It would have been horrid if we'd

got somebody in who was standoffish and despised them—and us.”

“I don’t think anybody would despise you,” I told her.

She gave me a quick glance, as if something in my voice had startled her into a new appreciation of me as an entity apart from my surroundings. Then she turned to the piano and began to turn over the music that littered its top.

CHAPTER THREE

§ 1

I AWOKE the next morning, as one so often will in a strange bed, hours before the need for rising. I lay and looked round the little room, gloating silently on the boxes of books that would to-day be unpacked and laid out for use.

This time yesterday I was in my old lodging at Ladyport, preparing to leave the town with little or no regret. To-day I was here with two new friends whose affection I had and returned.

It came to me with a shock of wonderment that on the other side of the brick wall lay Joan asleep. I imagined her head on the pillow with her hair billowing about her face. I wondered how things were between her and Peter. She called him Sinbad, and he called her Jimbo. They were probably engaged, or if not engaged on the point of some formal betrothal. They could have chosen no better mates. But he was not worthy. No one was worthy. Even he . . . I pictured his frank open face and square-set figure. He dressed well, I told myself. I must have looked a shabby dog beside his neat tailoring, with my old gray suit and my creased and rumpled tie. I, too, must affect that deep winged collar which he wore. I had never paid enough attention to my appearance. She must have thought me a tramp of a fellow, unless—happy thought—

she put it down to the neglect and eccentricity of genius, which, when you came to think of it, it really was.

My articles had attracted the attention of old Merry of the *Chronicle* and I had secured a position now from which all things were possible. I indulged in a reverie in which I was Peter's best man, concealing my own love for the bride under an impassive exterior, although my pallor attracted attention, and after my brilliant speech at the breakfast they went off on their honeymoon, and I turned to the work of reforming the world. I was just on the point of declaring to Peter's widow my long hidden devotion to her after a career more blinding in its meteoric success than Disraeli's when I was brought tumbling out of my day-dream by the sound of her singing. She was evidently up and dressing.

I jumped out of bed, shivered, and jumped back again. There would be no chance of the bathroom for a while, and I might as well be warm as not. . . .

I awoke again to the knocking of Marion Mary at my door.

"Sarf pas nine," she said.

"Right," I answered and tumbled out in good earnest. I took meticulous care with my toilet, although a wisp of hair at the crown of my head defied all efforts to subdue it. Also, I cut my ear while shaving and had to dab a piece of cotton wool to the wound, which gave me an unheroic look that displeased me.

In the sitting-room Peter was straddling the rug reading the paper.

"Ullo, Dogsboddy," he said.

"Morning," I answered.

"Seen anything of Jimbo?"

"I think she got up hours ago."

"Silly ass must have gone out. Ma Gallus won't serve breakfast unless her ewe lamb is here."

This was hardly lover's talk, and yet it might be a masculine affectation to conceal emotion. He was envi-

ably dressed this morning in a light gray, a suit beautifully cut, and with an air of expense about it. Whatever the state of his fee book, he looked a prosperous young professional man. He was shod with exceedingly good shoes and his linen would not have disgraced Beau Brummel. He had that inborn knack of always looking clean that some men possess, cool and clean and alert.

We discussed the morning's news without great enthusiasm.

The door opened to admit the missing Jimbo. She, too, was a picture of right garbing, in her white blouse and dark skirt and neat tan shoes. I felt more than ever grubby.

"Morning," she sang at us.

"Good morning," I responded with something ridiculously like an obeisance. Peter contented himself with glancing at his watch.

"Ten minutes late," he grunted.

"All right, grumpy."

"I'm not grumpy."

"Yes you are grumpy. You're always grumpy at breakfast."

"Am I grumpy, Peyton?" he asked.

Here was a wretched dilemma. If Joan said he was grumpy—he must be grumpy. But if Peter said he wasn't grumpy—he couldn't be grumpy. Neither of them could do wrong, and yet here they were, don't you know, involving their hero-worshiper in a contention of opposites. I withheld judgment for a saving moment which allowed Marion Mary to stagger in with her tray of poached eggs.

After breakfast they helped me to unpack, Peter taking off his coat and rolling up spotless white cuffs which made me acutely conscious of my own gray woolen shirt. We took down the picture of Niagara and replaced it by my cherished print of Beata Beatrix, for all young men of any pretensions to taste possessed a Rossetti in those days; but Mr. Wilson Barrett and his leading lady we

left. The bamboo bookcase wouldn't hold half my books, and even so it only accommodated those of a set size. The rest we dumped down on the floor, where Joan sat and dipped into them, while Sinbad sprawled on the bed with his pipe reading a tattered Longfellow. Occasionally each would insist upon reading aloud a snatch of whatever had caught attention. Only the other day I took down a copy of Mill's essay on Liberty and the mere run of his words conjured Joan again before me, wrinkling her nose over the Latin and reading,

"Genius can only breathe freely in an atmosphere of freedom. Persons of genius are, *ex vi termini*, more individual than any other people."

I remember being caught by the phrase.

"What do you say?" I asked, from the table where I was setting out photographs and a supply of writing materials.

She read from the book in her hand,

"Persons of genius, it is true, are, and are always like to be, a small minority,"

"That means us," she said.

"but in order to have them it is necessary to preserve the soil in which they grow."

"That means the kitchen downstairs and this garret. Funny library you've got. Very mixed. What are you really gone on?"

I thought for a moment.

"Statecraft," I answered, "and, of course, good writing."

"Statecraft—you mean politics?"

"If you like. I mean ordering things so well that everybody has the essential things, freedom, security, comfort, happiness, a home."

"Can it be done?"

"Why shouldn't it?"

"I say—are you a Socialist?"

"No. Are you?"

"No. What are you?"

"I'm an aristocrat."

"Loud laughter," said Peter from the bed.

I was in deadly earnest and refused to be drawn.

"I mean, I believe in aristocratic government. I don't trust the mob—much. I believe in selected men, responsible men, specially trained men."

"In short—prigs and snobs," said Peter, laying down his book.

"Why should they be prigs and snobs? Does a sense of responsibility and a specialized training make a man a snob? If it does, you ought to be one. As an architect you've had a specialized training."

"I am a snob," he answered cheerfully.

"Shut up, Sinbad. What do you mean by your specially-selected men? Who's going to select 'em. Who's going to train 'em? What about people like me who don't want to be governed but just want to go on painting or writing or composing or whatever it may be?"

"They'd emerge."

"How would they emerge?"

"In the usual way." I quoted a few names of men who had emerged.

"You mean that if a man made such an impression that you couldn't ignore him, you'd incorporate him in the governing caste."

"Precisely."

"But we do that now."

"Yes, I know, but we clutter it up with all this democracy business."

I had a sudden vision of the immense muddle and confusion of the race, and of the infinite number of young Peytons worrying away at an ideal of organization with-

out the requisite knowledge of prime causes and psychology to make their theories sound, and with an appalling lack of any sense of the real and practical difficulties in the way of communal reconstitution. Joan might have read my thought.

"I think the artist's is the better way. He doesn't worry about selected men or systems. He just goes on adding decorations to life, or covering ugly places, opening windows and breaking down doors. If people were accustomed to fine thoughts and knew what beauty can mean, they'd soon find a way of parceling out the essential things."

"That isn't enough," I insisted. "We must plan and work and scheme and be ready for eventualities."

"How the devil can you be ready for eventualities," said Peter, "when you are not working with calculable factors? Who guessed when the steam engine was coming to mess everything up? Who could have foreseen an era of coal burning and smoke? I think Jimbo's right. All we can do is to ease things a little here and there, and explain the bad incidences to people so that they'll have an idea what's hurting them and why. You always will have, in practice, government by a caste."

"I know that, but we ought to make certain that the caste is aware of its function."

We were, you see, very young, and each, in our own way, ardent about these things. We were happy enough in Prosperity Street, and the Galluses were happy enough, but we credited every neighbor with a brooding and sullen discontent due to injustice and lack of opportunity, a lack of opportunity which we honestly then felt to be engineered rather than accidental.

"In any case," resumed Peter, "you can't alter the innate folly of the human race. Draw up your rules, appoint your selected men, provide everybody with a copy of Plato's *Republic* at the age of ten, and men and women will still run about falling in love, and cutting their ini-

tials on private trees or sacred statues, and over-eating on the things they like, and making their own lives out of their own little tin-pot souls."

"Yes. I know." I was very troubled. "But we could get rid of some of the confusions and the ugliness."

"Damn it, we are getting rid of 'em, hand over fist. What you ought to be concerned with, as a writer, is persuading people to get together to back selected improvements. But even now they do back things. Look at modern drainage systems compared with a couple of hundred years ago. Look at transport and policing compared with fifty years ago. Why, it's a paradise compared with England at the time of Waterloo."

I was not so sure, and said so. I think I posed a little for Joan's sake, seeing myself for her benefit as the great reformer—a new kind of reformer free from all nonsense and mere sentimentality—and I think Peter posed a little, too, as the hard-headed political pragmatist. I know that we neither of us knew what we really wanted or what the world was really up against.

§ 2

On the Sunday evening they both walked down with me to the doors of the newspaper office, where I was to take up duty. I hid the tremors of excitement which filled me and talked, priggishly enough, I daresay, of all I hoped to do now I was launched into my destined profession. They wished me luck, and I watched them go, not knowing whether my joy in my new work or my envy of old Peter was the greater.

Every big provincial city seemed in those days to have two newspapers, one dominant and prosperous, the other valiantly challenging its supremacy with a pitiful lack of means. In Headley the *Headley Chronicle* competed hopelessly against the wealth and prestige of the *Lodeshire News*, that magnificent organ of Northern

opinion which no manufacturer, landowner, shipper, or cleric dared to neglect.

I want, if I can, to keep politics out of this story, but it will be difficult, for I am primarily a politician, and it had been my political contributions that had resulted in my being asked eventually to join the staff of the paper. If I can't keep politics out of my story, I can at least keep it free from party. I will only say that the *Lodeshire News* was the organ of the heavy Buffs while the *Chronicle* was supposed, quite fallaciously, to be the organ of the light Blues, and the light Blues were at that time hopelessly out of favor with the English electorate. Whenever a regular purchaser of the *Chronicle* died, the circulation figures went down by one, for no younger subscriber replaced him. The revenue from advertisements was also declining.

John Merry, who welcomed me that night on my first appearance, was the principal shareholder in the company which owned the paper. His word was law. I was taken through a maze of corridors to the Editor's room by a clerk who mumbled my name and left me to my fate. I had seen my new Chief only once before, when he had interviewed me at a hotel in Ladyport with regard to my appointment. He rose now with outstretched hand.

It will be impossible to communicate the sense of old-worldliness that emanated from him. He was a man of middle height, very portly, and heavily built. He had been a dashing young man when the Crimean War was being fought and had never altered his fashion of dress. Down over the fancy waistcoat flowed a vast beard, gray now but still retaining traces of brown. His ample trousering had fob pockets cut on the slant and he would stand with his hands thrust in these, leaving his two red thumbs projecting on to the swell of his paunch. His frock coat was generously cut and somehow gave him an air of being a hunting man. He might, in fact, have been own brother to Anthony Trollope, but he wore a monocle in

his left eye which made his gaze less placid than probably it really was.

"Glad to see you," he said in his deep voice.

I could think of no better response than a thank you, Sir. In business we had called our heads of departments Sir, and I thought it best to continue the formality into which I had been drilled.

"Have you found comfortable rooms?" His eyebrows were so rugged that they seemed to project like crags over the blue eyes.

I assured him that I was satisfactorily housed. I had an odd feeling that now he had got me here he didn't quite know what to do with me.

The door behind me opened and a lean man of about fifty came in, coated and hatted.

"Hello, John," he said.

John Merry's face lighted up.

"Hello, Richard."

The newcomer took off his outdoor things. The room in which Merry worked was square, with a double desk table and a sofa as its most prominent articles of formal furniture. Merry was still standing up at one side of the desk with me at his left hand. The newcomer advanced to the other side of the table and sat down.

"Oh, Dick, this is Mr. Peyton, our new assistant."

The lean man nodded to me casually. He was almost completely bald and from under a red beaky nose a ragged red moustache followed the line of his mouth between the deep grooves that were its lateral boundaries. He had cheeks as red as twin bowls of pickled cabbage, and veined in the same way. A long stringy neck with an abnormally prominent Adam's Apple disappeared into the lowest collar that the sartorial art of man ever devised. He was clad in a short jacket of rough tweed and trousers of the same material but even louder pattern. He wore heavy black shooting-boots the soles of which to my quick glancing eye seemed inches thick.

"This is Mr. Chamberlain, my deputy and our chief leader writer," explained John Merry for my benefit.

I bowed. I was not then aware that I was the third assistant to be presented to Richard Chamberlain within a short twelve months, and I thought he took my advent a little calmly. Like all papers of its kind, the *Chronicle* was constantly discovering young men who could write, only to lose them the moment a better vacancy offered itself.

"I don't quite know where to put him, Richard. We've put Blenkinsop where Bevin used to work."

Chamberlain jerked his arm towards a small table under the window.

"Why not clear that table and let him work there for a night or two? He'd get into things all the more quickly."

"Won't we find it too crowded?"

"I won't, if you won't."

"Well, we'll do that."

John Merry rang a bell and when a boy appeared commanded him to clear the small table and dust it. Chamberlain, in the meantime, had routed out from his own drawer a blotting-pad and a handful of pencils which he handed to me.

"This is your first staff job, isn't it?" he said. I told him yes. He spoke with a tone of deep melancholy always, and he rarely smiled, although he could explode into a kind of short spasmed mirth readily enough when anything caught his fancy. He was liable to these little explosive outbursts when he was writing his leaders, although nobody else in the world ever found anything in them at all amusing. It is only fair to say, however, that things at which the whole world laughed left Richard Chamberlain unmoved.

"It's a dog's life," he informed me. "I've been at it for nearly forty years. If you're wise you'll go back to

commerce. I don't suppose you are wise. You wouldn't be here if you were."

"Don't discourage the lad, Richard. Journalism has done very well by me. I hunt twice a week, I eat well, and sleep well, and I enjoy my game of cards."

"But you're a bloated capitalist. Peyton and I aren't plutocrats like you. John, I shall write on Ireland to-night." He was filling a huge pipe from a tin of coarse tobacco.

"Is there any news?" said Merry.

"Not a scrap, but it's 'up' to-morrow. I shall warn His Majesty's Government . . . you know . . . Heaven knows I'm as tired of Ireland as any of our readers, but it must be done . . . one column and a half, to make a good turnover."

I was disappointed. I had imagined that there would be a solemn conclave in which the affairs of the day would be seriously debated, and that I would astonish them by all my knowledge and insight, and here was this lean, red-nosed man calmly proceeding to discuss a burning question without so much as the most formal consultation.

I settled down at my little table. Chamberlain was already writing in pencil, his bony knees crossed, and his pipe in full foul blast. Without looking up he said,

"Peyton."

"Yes, Mr. Chamberlain."

"Don't stand on ceremony. You can smoke. You can do anything but spit."

John Merry swung his chair round towards me, with a bundle of papers in his hand.

"You'd better take over features. We do one a day. Got a memo book? I'll give you the days. Ready? Fashions for Women, Monday. Engineering, Tuesday. 'From The Prompter's Box,' Wednesday. Book page, Thursday, with a special article by Poetaster, who's Cyril Jones. Huntin', Friday. Agriculture, Saturday. They all come

from the Delane Agency, and all you have to do is to sub 'em and put in cross-heads, not too many, we don't want the page to look too broken, and mark the headings Five and Five A, and send them up. Have you got that? Five and Five A. In figures with a little ring round 'em. That's for the comps, do ye see? Here's Fashions and Engineering. I'll tell the letter clerk to let you have the others as they come."

I took the flimsy papers from his hands, and proceeded carefully to prepare them for Press.

"How do I mark the day, Sir?" I asked.

"Write 'Mon's Chr' or 'Tues Chr' at the left hand corner with a ring around it. A ring means catch line. A catch line isn't put into forme, you understand. Isn't printed. It's only an instruction to the man making up. By the way, you've seen a paper made up and put to bed, haven't you?"

I had, many times, for all my leisure had been spent hanging about the *Ladyport Courant*.

It was, perhaps, half an hour later that he turned and addressed me again.

"What about a leader?"

My heart jumped and sang. This was my moment.

"Seen a subject?" he went on.

"It is Marcus Monmouth's birthday to-morrow," I said, a little dubiously. Monmouth, that now almost forgotten novelist, was then the idol of a certain section of the literary world.

Chamberlain looked up from paging his folios.

"We ought to have something on Monmouth, John," he said. "None of our people read him, but it'll give us a tone. They like the literary touch. Do you like Monmouth, young Peyton?"

I confessed to a passion for his gentle pastorals, at which Chamberlain grunted, but whether in approval or dislike of my taste I didn't know.

"Well—write me half a column or so. Remember we

have a hard-headed Lodeshire public. No rhapsodizing."

I plunged into the congenial task. I have always had facility with words, and I had written so many freelance articles and lectured so often to little literary societies about Marcus Monmouth that I was now free from any diffidence about my subject.

When I had finished I rose and handed my manuscript to Mr. Merry.

"You work quickly. That's good," he said. "Now you can stand by and curse me while I edit it. That is the worst of writing leading articles. There is always some heavy-handed fellow ready to slash out your best phrases. I know. I've suffered that way in my time."

He sat reading my slips of copy, one hand caressing the deep beard and the other poised with a pencil over the work. Twice it descended.

"Can't pass 'rejuvenescent fervor,'" he said and wrote in "inspiring enthusiasm," and then "Don't think we dare prophesy certain immortality for any contemporary. Better say 'secure in that lasting appreciation.' That's all right. Good, in fact." He threw the leader into a basket and leaned back in his chair. "Have you made any arrangements about food?"

I had not. It had never passed my mind that this was Sunday and that I was here for seven hours.

"Well, as this is your first night you'd better dine as my guest, just to celebrate the association."

I thanked him.

"Are you coming, Richard?"

Richard declared that he was not hungry, that he wanted to finish his article, that most men ate too much, that he had dyspepsia, and that he might join us later. Mr. Merry and I donned our hats and coats and left him.

§ 3

That meal was the first of the many table talks that I was to have with old John Merry. There was in Headley no Press Club, and the County Club to which he took me was little used by the ordinary members on Sunday evenings. We found ourselves sitting at one end of a long table in a big dark room, the gloom of which was only relieved by the gas which burned over the fire-place, and the fire itself, at our end. A square of white table cloth had been set and there was a waitress in attendance. She greeted my cicerone with deference.

"Is Mr. Chamberlain coming to-night, Sir?" she asked.

"I don't think so," said Mr. Merry. He stood for a few seconds balancing his heavy body on its heels before the fire, his hands in the fob pockets of his trousers. The girl brought in two steaming bowls of soup and we sat down to eat.

Merry asked me about my early life, spoke of his own career, and then talked of his paper.

"What I want to do," he said at length, "is to ease old Richard a bit. He's written leading articles for us now for nearly thirty years. To tell you the truth, he was always a bit heavy. But we mustn't hurt his feelings. I'd rather ruin the paper than hurt poor old Richard's feelings. He stood by me and the paper at a bad time. But he has no sense of the moment—no *joie de vivre*—no zip. Now you and I, Peyton, are up-to-date."

I believe the old boy really believed it. There we were, you know, I at twenty-two, bubbling over with the ferment of the time, and he over forty years my senior with his life unchanged from its interests of his own youth—I a smooth-faced boy and he a bearded, elderly man—but to him we were contemporaries in spirit. His paper was decaying and compared with the younger sheets was

hopelessly out-moded, but he, comparing it with the older-fashioned *Lodeshire News*, quite obviously thought it a sparkling and modern production.

He went on, from his flattering association of my ingenuousness with his experience, to a detailed account of what difficulties beset us. There was no great fund of capital resource from which to purchase new equipment, the staff was largely composed of elderly men or very callow boys, and the party which we nominally supported was not only out of favor but rent with schism. And yet—and yet—what could we not do? We would make our voice heard. We could stop the rot. We could press a reform here, and check an unwanted change there. What counted, after all, was honesty of purpose. One might affect cynicism with old Richard, but it wasn't the means of hunting and a quiet life that a man got from his paper. It was the sense of influencing events. Speaking as man to man, there was the duty side about which one didn't want to talk like a prig. One gave the public clean news. One expressed honest opinions. Wouldn't do to talk like this to old Richard, he might laugh. I saw that, didn't I? Judging by my free-lance articles I had the right sense of what was needed and I could write. He would admit freely that I could write. Mightn't we together make the paper what it ought to be—a national platform for sound ideas instead of a merely local news-sheet? He liked me—he would admit freely that he liked me—and he hoped I wasn't out of sympathy with his views. He couldn't pay me an extravagant salary. He would admit freely that he was hampered by lack of capital. But if I saw things the right way I would realize that my own fortunes would progress with those of the paper.

So he talked on, tugging at his beard, glancing at me through his monocle to see if he were making himself foolish, admitting freely in every other sentence something or other which he could hardly have denied, and generally taking me into the heart of his confidence. He had tried

two or three assistants and I was evidently the first really to engage his personal liking.

We returned to the office linked in a secret conspiracy of worthy aims.

§ 4

Journalism during my life time has changed so much that I can hardly conjure back the easygoing procedure which distinguished the office of the *Headley Chronicle* when I first knew it. Mechanical improvements, from electric bells to linotype machines and three-decker printing presses, from typewriters to delivery motors, have changed both the atmosphere of newspaper offices and the spirit of the trade. Before I deserted newspapers for Parliament we had brought their production to a high point of efficiency, and a daily paper had become an organism of very intricate and delicate parts with news as its life blood. It was not so with such older sheets as that which gave me my first start.

Our machines were unable to print and fold at one operation more than a relatively few pages, so that when we had a big issue we had to print in two parts. A big issue was only eight pages. The consequence was that we were always struggling with a grim congestion of material, for with few sub-editors, and those, by modern criteria, unskilled, there was a terrible tendency to set into type news and articles which had no chance of seeing the light. This "over-set" was the only thing about which I ever heard Merry roundly swear. There was no coördination in those days. We never worked to plan. Merry and Chamberlain and I sent up articles and letters and the sub-editors poured out a stream of news, and for some reason the reporters were too proud to have their copy sub-edited and sent it straight to the compositors. Night after night there was a bunch of proofs which Chamberlain and I were vainly supposed to bring up to date by changing such phrases as "yesterday morning" into

"Wednesday morning" or "early this week," or from which we finally freed news items or articles that were too old even for the *Chronicle* to use.

I mention this because I want you to realize just what filled my mind. Even on my first night I discovered that my old ingenuous idea that the literary or political journalist was a man who wrote was utterly and hopelessly wrong. I saw that half, or more than half, of my function as a journalist would be pure organization. The chaos and casualness of that office gave me a new vocation. I saw that in addition to reforming the world I must help to reform journalism as it was practiced on my own paper. I knew that in London certain young men had revolutionized all the processes of producing daily papers and I saw no reason, even if we did lack money, why something of their efficiency shouldn't be imported into the provinces.

At something after midnight Merry went upstairs to the composing room, to supervise the making up of the pages, and I spoke charily to Chamberlain of newspaper method. I was terrified of seeming presumptuous and of appearing to teach my grandmother to suck eggs. I found the lean, gloomy man unexpectedly responsive.

"I'm glad you've come," he said, "for what I'm always wanting to do is to ease old John a bit. He's run this paper for nearly forty years and, to tell you the truth, he was always a bit heavy. We mustn't hurt his feelings, mark you. I'd rather see the rag go to ruin than hurt old John's feelings. But he has no sense of the moment. That's what's needed in journalism to-day—a sense of the moment. He has no flair. He's a politician. Now you and I, Peyton, are up-to-date. . . ."

My jaw must have dropped as I listened, for I had heard this so recently from other lips. Chamberlain went on to expound. There was, I knew, no great amount of capital behind the concern. But what could we not do? We could make our voice heard. We could stop the rot.

We could give clean news. As an organ of opinion, we could press a reform here or check an unwanted change there. What counted, after all, was honesty of purpose. One might play the cynic to old John, but one had one's ideas and ideals of journalism. The reward of the journalist was the knowledge that he was influencing events. One got a bit *blasé* at times, a bit jaded, but on the whole one had one's ideals. Old John would laugh, but couldn't we make the paper what it ought to be—a national news-sheet instead of a local rag? We could.

So he talked, tugging his sinister moustache and craning his long neck still further out of his absurdly low collar. He linked me to him in a conspiracy of worthy aims.

CHAPTER FOUR

§ 1

THE NEXT DAY Marion Mary brought up my breakfast at eleven. I awoke to find her at my bedside with the tray.

"'Ullo!" she said.

"Hello . . . goo' mornin' . . . ahhhhhhhhh . . ." I yawned at her "What time is it?"

"'S'leven."

I sat up and took the tray on to my knees. It held the two boiled eggs and marmalade prescribed by the agnostic Raniker.

"Ma says, what about your dinner? We have ours at one o'clock and Miss Agnew has hers. Mr. Wass doesn't come home for his. Ma says she'll set yours with Miss Agnew's if you like, but you're entitled to have it here, as a combined room, if you like."

The prospect of functioning as a combined room was as nothing to the wild joy of a meal *à deux* with Joan.

"I'll have it with Miss Agnew, if she doesn't mind," I said; "but I shan't want much."

"Oh, yes you will."

"Will I—how do you know?"

She put her face right into mine and opened two joyous eyes as she delivered her good news.

"Coz there's cole beef and mash pertatoes and a roly-poly." She drew back to see the effect upon me of this remarkable intimation. "Cole beef," she added reflectively, as if the mere words rejoiced her. And then, with something approaching ecstasy, "wiv mash pertatoes." She nodded her head at me, as if to compose any doubts I might have as to the possibility of such a combination. I had taken the top off my first egg and I extracted the fragment of white from the segment and held it out on the spoon towards the child. She gulped it down. "I thought you might do that," she said. "Mr. Raniker always did."

Mr. Raniker, I gathered, was a great hero. She stood patiently by until I had eaten one egg and decapitated the other. Then, having taken her toll from that, she said, "So long," and went her way.

Lunch with Joan. Lunch with Joan. Lunch with Joan. "Mr. Wass doesn't come home for his." Lunch with Joan.

Ma Gallus had thoughtfully sent up the morning paper, and I read my leading article with some gusto. It seemed to me to be particularly good. I reread it and discovered a misprint that seemed to make nonsense of the whole thing. I went cold with horror and hot with shame. Then I thought that perhaps others would hardly notice the error. In any case, I comforted myself, it was obvious what had been intended.

Perhaps I should get a letter from Marcus Monmouth. An invitation to stay with him for a week-end! Or a signed copy of his latest book . . . "to one who understands and believes." . . . Perhaps I should be asked to . . .

A neighboring clock was chiming the noon before I finished with my day dreaming. It behoved me to arise and shine.

The table in the sitting-room was thrillingly set for two. I wandered from bookcase to window and from window to bookcase in a mild fever of delighted apprehension.

She came at last.

"Good morning," I said, and grinned foolishly. She looked particularly sweet and radiant, I thought.

"Hello, Dogsbody," she said, and instantly turned a fiery red. "I'm so sorry," she explained hurriedly, "but Sinbad christened you, for some unearthly reason, and it just slipped out. You're not angry?"

How could I be? The absurd name on her lips was a title of honor, for it meant friendship.

"You see," she went on, "Sinbad never by any chance uses anybody's proper name, and until he finds the right thing to call them he just calls them by the first term of opprobrium that occurs to him."

"I'm not a bit angry," I assured her. "But if you call me Dogsbody, I think I ought to call you Jimbo."

"Of course you can. But I won't call you Dogsbody. It's horrid. I don't know what made me say it." The blush that had waned surged up again to her cheeks. At that moment I was her devoted slave, head-over-ears in love with her, lost to all other realities but her endearing beauty. She calmly riveted my chains with her next words.

"I say, I've read your article on old Monmouth. It was yours, wasn't it? It was awfully good."

I made deprecating noises in my throat.

"It really was awfully good. Will you show me some more of your writing, sometime?"

"I will if you'll show me some of your painting."

"What a man for making bargains you are. My silly daubs won't interest you."

I protested by all my gods. She flushed, this time with pleasure.

"Sometime," she promised.

We sat down to "cole beef wiv mash pertatoes." There was a wonderful sense of intimacy about the meal, she sitting demurely at the head of the table and I at her right hand knocking things over in my anxiety to minister to her minor needs.

After the roly-poly had been consumed she poured out two cups of tea and calmly took a cigarette from the packet which I had taken from my pocket.

"Dogsbody," she said, "I'm worried about Marion Mary."

"What's the matter with Marion Mary?"

"She's just left school, you know."

"So I gather."

"Well, if we're not careful she'll degenerate into a slut of a girl wasting her youth looking after her mother's lodgers."

That was possible, I agreed.

"We've got to prevent that, you know," said Joan.

"How?"

"Well, it's pretty obvious that Ma is too fat to run up and down stairs much. She'll have to have help. I think I can find a place for Marion Mary with Madame Hester, but the point is persuading her father and mother to let her take it. Now, an orphan seems to me the way out."

"An orphan?"

I was quite at sea.

"Yes. What we'll have to do is to persuade Pa Gallus to let his girl go away to be trained in a decent trade, and we'll have to persuade Ma Gallus to import an orphan to help in the house. I shall leave Pa Gallus to you. You'll know how to manoeuvre him. The orphan will have to share Marion Mary's bed."

"When do you suggest broaching the matter?"

"No time like the present. Ma Gallus will be up any minute for the tea tray. Then I'll let fly."

Ma came up, looking fatter than ever in a print frock with pink stripes running horizontally across her frontage. She greeted me effusively.

"I hope you slep' well, Mr. Paynim," she concluded.

"Like a top," I assured her.

"Ah, some do, you know, I do myself, I must confess, now Pa turns and coughs, an' wheezes, and groans, something awful, not that I mind, being hardened, as you might say, with having traveling zoos next to our fit-up time and again, and once being in a wild beast show, me and Pa, together, in an extra turn called "David in the Lions' Den," or some such name, Pa in a white night-shirt and me in floating robes that I made out of a turkish towel, the trainer being the gentleman cast into the den and Pa being a wicked king whose name I can't quite remember, it's funny, come to think of it, that time was when I was a quick study and now I can't remember my next door neighbor's name two days together, not that we stayed long with the wild beasts, it being considered *infra* dignity for legitimates to be attached to such a show, although the money was good and that really helped most to buy the very first caravan we ever had, and a squeaky second-hand, home-made contraption it was, only I grew very fond of it, it being our first real home, as you might say, and not being aware of the rise in fortunes that was awaiting us, and having nothing, as you might say, to compare with it. . . ."

"Ma," said Joan, stemming the gentle, lapping flow of words.

"Yes, dear?"

"How would you like Marion Mary to learn dress-making?"

"I wouldn't mind, me being a bit of a dressmaker myself, this very working dress being made from a remnant that I picked up from Miss Prim only last week, only it

was an awkward length and the stripes have to go round me the wrong way, it being what you might call fatal for a plump figure to have anything but ups and downs in a pattern, not, of course, that it matters in the house where there's only us to see each other. . . ."

"If you like, Ma, I can find a place for Marion with a proper, professional dressmaker and she can be taught the business properly."

"Well, why shouldn't she, it's very kind of you, but you always were one to be thinking of others, only I don't know what Pa would say, he'd be 'Oh-godding' about human lives so cheap, not that he'd mind, only it gives him a cue, as you might say, and Pa was never a one to miss a good cue, he being, as you would say, a born historian."

She meant histrion, bless her.

"But if Marion Mary went to learn dressmaking you'd need someone about the house, wouldn't you?"

"Not to notice, for I managed before she left school, as you know, and very comfortably we did, though I says it, not that *I'm* getting any younger, and the child is a help, for all that she goes running out to see that Aspasia Winterbottom every time my back's turned, but then, I always say, girls will be girls."

"Listen, Ma. Suppose I found a place for Marion Mary and she got, say, three shillings a week, wouldn't it be a good plan to get a girl in to help you with the work?"

Ma sat down at this and looked something doubtful.

"What sort of a girl, I don't want any 'ussies 'anging about Pa, I had enough of that, my dear, with the red-haired singing soubrette he once engaged, singing soubrette she called herself, simpering 'ussy I called her, not that Pa wanted her and her airs and graces, he has his faults but he's always been fond of his own old woman, Pa has, bless him, only I don't believe in having temptation hanging about the house, men being what they are

and girls being, as I've said before, no better than they ought to be, youth being frivolous, as you might say. . . ."

"Oh, I meant quite a young girl, something like Marion Mary herself."

Ma's usually beaming face grew dark with base and disillusioning knowledge.

"Ah," she said, "young girls have things in their hair. . . ."

Joan gallantly stopped all elaborations of this theme.

"Not if we went to the right place for her. There is the Orphanage in Battle Road. They could find us a nice clean girl."

"Where would we put her?"

"Couldn't she share Marion Mary's room? It would be a fine thing to see an orphan from a big institution in a real home for the first time, wouldn't it, Ma?"

She had selected her ground with consummate skill. Ma Gallus had a heart as big as the world. One could see the idea taking possession of her as her round, red face broke into the familiar smile of benign good-will.

"Poor dears, they must have a terrible time, with no one to call their own, and no place to lay their heads, even if they have things in them, and a bit of carbolic would soon cure that, I don't see why we shouldn't, although what Pa'll say I don't know, but it would be rather nice to have summun that I could depend on for running up the stairs, coz, after all, if Marion Mary doesn't go to dressmaking she'll be off sooner or later to get married or something, you can't expect them to tie themselves up all their lives, I know that I never took kindly to being tied to my Ma's apron. . . ."

So it was arranged. Joan and I, subject to Pa's consent, were to go and select a nice clean orphan and add her to the establishment. I decided that my attack upon Pa need not be delayed. He was out about the mysterious business that he followed when his asthma allowed it, which business I afterwards learned to be nothing more

sinister or remunerative than canvassing for a firm of insurance brokers, but Ma said that I would no doubt find him at two o'clock in the "Singing Sambo," a hostelry within ten minutes' walk of Prosperity Street. I accordingly donned my hat and coat and made my way there.

The "Singing Sambo" I found without much difficulty. In its exterior presentation it differed little from any corner dwelling house in its neighborhood, being marked out only by a swinging sign, which displayed a nigger playing the banjo and apparently singing to his own accompaniment. Three stone steps led to the front door, steps of such cleanliness that there was a specially made border of extra-white rubbing stone round each of their edges.

I went in and a buxom lass behind a little bar greeted me with a friendly "good afternoon."

"Good afternoon," I said, raising my hat to her, which demonstration of gentility had an immediate effect upon her, for she simpered audibly the next time she spoke to me, and when later she served me, her voice rose two tones higher than when she served at any other table. "Is Mr. Gallus here, by any chance?" I asked.

"He's in the snug," she said and opened a little doorway through the bar for me.

The snug was an incredibly narrow little room, with the temperature of an oven, raised by a roaring mass of coals in a grate almost as deep as the room was long. Pa Gallus was enjoying a glass of hot rum and eating bread and cheese while he listened to the discourse of his host, who straddled the rug.

"Mr. Gallus," said the girl, "gentleman asking for you."

Pa's face shone with welcome.

"Come in, Mr. Peyton, come in, sir, come in. Allow me to introduce you to Mr. Pony Pleasants—at one time sole proprietor of Pony Pleasants' Plantation Minstrels

—Mr. Peyton, Mr. Pleasants, Mr. Pleasants, Mr. Peyton.”

Mr. Pony Pleasants, who would have been more aptly christened after a cart-horse, wiped his hands carefully on his big apron, and then gave me greeting. Any friend of Garrick Gallus, I was to understand, was a friend of Pony Pleasants. I responded suitably, and demanded the right to buy drink for them both. Pa Gallus didn't mind if he had another tot of rum, and Mr. Pony Pleasants was pleased to drink a tankard of his own “mixed” with me. I ordered half a tankard of bitter ale, and we drank solemnly to each other, Pa Gallus and I at either side of the fire and Mr. Pony Pleasants standing like a colossus before us.

They resumed their conversation, from which I gathered that Henry Irving, Squire Bancroft, and Wilson Barrett were vastly overrated actors; that nigger minstrelsy was the only kind of vaudeville entertainment that could be considered as at all tolerable to a legitimate, since it ranked as music and was obviously own cousin to grand opera; that some damned Yank jockey had pulled a horse and deserved rather Eastern mutilation at the mouths of red-hot monkeys; that the turf was rotten with corruption and nobody but a fool would back horses; that a horse named “Creeping Christmas” was certain to win the three-thirty that afternoon; that both Garrick Gallus and Pony Pleasants stood to win a small parcel from its success; that the insurance business was in a bad way; that State legislation was ruining all honest publicans; that women were queer cattle; and that Bloward Smith, whoever he might be, has asked for trouble with regard to a Mrs. Watchorn, which trouble he had duly received at the hands of Mr. Watchorn. At this point the girl in the bar called “Pa” and Mr. Pony Pleasants, again wiping his hands carefully on his apron, left us without apology.

I invited Garrick Gallus to take another tot, which

invitation he reluctantly refused, partly on the plea of the time of day and partly on account of the mischief which he believed was wrought on the human interior by too much hot spirit.

"I've just been talking about your daughter," I informed him.

"Ah, Marion Mary!" His silk kerchief was out, and, as usual, I was from thence in imminent danger from its emphatic swishings of emphasis. "A good girl, sir, a good girl. A help to her mother. A child of nature, unspoiled and simple."

"She's just left school, I hear."

"Yes. The blessings of education were withheld from me, Sir, but not from her. What education I had I gathered for myself. Books, Sir, books."

"I hope you won't think me impertinent, Mr. Gallus"—he waved a reassuring hand—"but Miss Agnew and I have been thinking that the daughter of such an artist as you"—he bowed—"would be wasted on domestic work. She must have that in her which needs an outlet for self-expression. She needs an art, a craft, a means of impressing her own personality on life." I seemed to have caught his own trick of rhetoric, and he answered to it as a bell will answer to its own note.

"Mr. Peyton, you are a man of discernment. You see before you a man who in his day has been the idol of millions. I may, in the evening of my days, have been reduced to soliciting from thriftless housewives that little forethought for the future which an insurance policy denotes, but time was when I made the booth ring with laughter. I have had strong men sobbing and women weeping without reserve. My daughter, Sir, is no ordinary child. She deserves her chance. And, by God, Sir, she shall have it, 'The Guards need power, and, by God, she shall have it.' I mean they shall have it. You've probably heard Irving play Brewster? Some evening you must hear me recite my shortened version. I make no

comparisons. You must judge for yourself. But the child—you were saying?"

I explained the possibility of Marion Mary being taken into Madame Hester's work-rooms and taught the business of dressmaking, throwing a glamor over that occupation to suit my interlocutor's temperament. He quite caught fire.

"Robes by Madame Marion. Why not, why not? I suppose you want me to talk her mother over. You are a kindly conspirator, Sir. It shall be done. But, wait. The domestic duties. The household cares. Who is to assist my good lady in those duties which the presence in our abode of strangers, of guests, throws upon her?"

I explained our plan, indicating that he was of all men the one molded by providence to bring sunshine into the dull life of an orphan child. He immediately saw himself in the right rôle, to my great relief.

"Sanctuary from the world! Sir, the house of Gallus, Garrick Gallus, shall be a refuge for whatever waif you and Miss Agnew select. Our cloaks shall cover her wounds. While we have a crust, the child of misfortune shall not want for bread. Under the care of my good lady, than whom no better woman treads the ground, she shall grow from the gloom of a neglected childhood into happy blossoming womanhood."

He elaborated the picture for me, of Darby and Joan Gallus in extreme old age being tended by a lovely creature who would, but for them, have been dragged to ruin by the snares of a hard and wicked world. Who knew, he asked me, but that some day the children of Madame Marion, the world-famous modiste, might not be nursed and comforted by her who had been an orphan child?

I pressed another tot of rum upon him, and he accepted the invitation now with alacrity. It was but fitting that we should drink to the future of the young Incognita whose fortunes we were about to take into our care.

Pony Pleasants' pleasant daughter bore us our flagons fully charged, and upstanding we drank to the waif who was to be rescued by our care from an evil fate. I had not the heart to suggest that if we did not levy upon the orphanage, some other householder would surely take our orphan, with, perhaps, better means of ensuring her fortunes. I was content to join in the toast which the little man proposed, but in my heart it was to his own good fortune that I drank. He was afire at the mere idea of playing beneficent providence to someone who needed aid, and for his great heart and quickly kindled imagination I duly honored him.

§ 2

The following day Joan and I went to the orphanage to select our victim.

"The Headley Home for Motherless and Fatherless Children" was a big stone building standing in Battle Road, at the extreme limit of its suburban ramifications. Beyond the Home were fields, indubitable fields even if the grass was a little the worse for the pall of Headley smoke that hung overhead and despite the presence at frequent intervals of little manufactories which had been forced from the center of the town by rising rents or lack of accommodation.

We rang the big bell at the lodge gates and a bottle-nosed gentleman in an extraordinary suit of green corduroy, which made him look something between a railway porter and the admiral of a South American navy, came to the window of his dwelling and then reluctantly to his door. He wore a wooden leg of the most primitive pattern and something nasty had happened to his left eye, so that his gaze was malign. Seeing that we insisted upon standing by the consequences of our rash bell-ringing act he stumped to the gates and opened them. We asked for the Secretary. Without a word he took the clay pipe from his

mouth and pointed with its abbreviated stem up the drive. We thanked him and went our way towards the building.

The door of the Home stood open and we stepped through the portals into the hall, from whence led off a door marked "Secretary." At this we boldly knocked and a reedy voice bade us enter.

The secretary was a small man with very weak eyes, protected by thick glasses, and a head as like a melon as any melon I have ever seen. Even the yellow color of the rind was simulated by thin hair carefully spread over its surface. He rose in his chair with excessive politeness and wished us good day. We returned his greeting and sat down at his invitation to explain our business.

Percy Gompers Griffin, that earnest and harmless little man, had the weakness of all executive persons attached to public institutions. He delighted in the importance of any executive act and he magnified his office. Learning that we wanted to offer work to one of the children in his care, he straightway cleared his throat and delivered a short lecture on the responsibilities of the Home to its inmates. He then favored us with a few remarks upon home life, its value and its probable effects. He then explained in some detail the method of registration of children entering the home and the relationship between himself and his trustees. He digressed to discuss the orphan statistics of Great Britain and Ireland, the attitude of medical men towards medical laymen, the importance of private institutions, such as his own, being allowed to function free from State interferences and the infinite superiority of such institutions over State provision. He finally informed us that the Matron would be able to supply the orphan we needed and that his only intervention would be the registration of the girl's departure after inquiries into the status of the new home into which she was to go. He then rang a bell and assured us that the weather was remarkable for the time of the year, if a little raw, and that he had heard, with

every confidence in its truth, a rumor that the Mayor of Headley was to be made a knight, which was doubtless due to his good work for the Home.

A man without a bottle-nose, but clad in the same bizarre green uniform, knocked perfunctorily on the door and stepped in. To his care we were committed, and dispatched to interview the Matron. He led us to a large room on the first floor and left us to our own devices. After a few moments there entered a tall girl, who might have been sixteen or seventeen years of age, clad in the prescribed dress of the Institution. Her hair was drawn tightly away from the forehead, her dress was of shiny gray material and was as tight about her spare form as an official passion for economy could make it, her legs were clothed in thick worsted stockings and heavy boots laced half-way up her shins, and her collar came low down over the shoulder from where its inner circumference threatened at every breath to choke her unfortunate young life out.

"Please will you come this way?" she said, in a low, rather pleasant voice. I thought that she had good features and might, in other circumstances, have been a striking looking girl. She took us from the big waiting-room to a smaller room on the same corridor, knocked gently at the door, and waited for the command to enter. This given she ushered us in and closed the door behind us, going quietly to a desk and thereafter sinking her identity into her surroundings.

We faced a big table at which sat a middle-aged woman busily writing. She looked up and smiled at us. She had a kindly, humorous mouth, but her eyes were strained and tired, and her smooth hair was so gray as to seem almost white. There was in her expression a visible combat between maternal humanity and official duty. Years of wrestling with executive functions, with epidemics, with all the manifold problems which confront those who endeavor to educate and train a mass of girls devoid of

all family tradition, had not dehumanized the Matron, but they had created in her a kind of dual personality. Sentiment warred with conscientiousness, impulse with regulations.

I advanced and made known our mission. She asked us a number of exceedingly pertinent questions, behind which it was not difficult to detect an experience of human nature at its most base and deceptive. Joan frankly sketched for her the conditions which would surround whatever girl took up duty in Prosperity Street and pledged her own honor on the motherliness of Mrs. Gallus.

"Gallus—Gallus?" said Matron, drawing an old-fashioned quill pen slowly between her lips. "Is Mrs. Gallus a rather stout party, who talks without periods or stops?"

We could not deny it. Probably Ma's temperament was such as to have caused at some time or another a clash with this ordered and disciplined representative of authority. My heart sank, but Matron raised it again.

"But of course, I know Mrs. Gallus," she said. "Why everyone here worships her. She used to come up once a week bringing pies for my children, home-made pies, and very good pies too. She hasn't been lately. I fancy that she finds much movement troublesome with her adequate proportions. I'll certainly trust any of my girls with that honest, motherly soul. I didn't realize. You see, nobody ever used her name. We all spoke of her as Ma, I'm afraid."

"Everybody does," said Joan. "It's a kind of certificate of character."

Matron rose with dignity.

"Well, let us go and select a girl. We have four or five at the leaving age."

The orphan in attendance rose and opened the door ready for our exit. As Matron passed through the girl put out a timid hand and touched her sleeve.

"Yes, Agatha?"

"Ma'am. . . ."

"Yes?"

"Could I go?"

"Go where?"

"Go into service."

Matron looked at her with rather troubled and puzzled eyes.

"But, Agatha, aren't you happy here?"

"Quite happy, ma'am."

"Then, why——?"

"I don't think I was meant for official life, ma'am. I mean, I would like to try living in a house . . . I mean. . . ."

Joan took the situation in hand.

"May I talk to Agatha?" she asked Matron, who nodded a permission.

Joan drew the girl over to the window.

"Do you realize what kind of a life it would be if we were allowed to take you as a servant?" she asked.

"No. But it would be different. When Matron offered to train me as an official I was glad, of course, because it meant that I wasn't going to be a charity girl any longer. But I want to go away for a while. I can scrub, and bake, and sew, and wait at table. We all can. I'd be the best servant in the world if you'd try me."

"Have you been here all your life?"

"Ever since I can remember."

"You might not like carrying coals upstairs and washing dishes, and doing floors, after being in this pleasant office with Matron."

"I would like anything, Miss, if I could only feel real for a while."

"If you could only feel real?"

"I don't feel real in here. I never have felt real. I feel like something out of a box of toys all painted like. But there is a separate me, isn't there, Miss? I'd like to try and find her. I shall never find her in here."

Joan bit her lip.

"Could you spare her?" she asked.

"If she really wants to go outside, I wouldn't stand in the way," replied Matron. "I should lose my best girl."

Agatha flushed with pride and darted a quick glance of affectionate gratitude to the elder woman. Whatever motive had prompted her request it was certainly not resentment or vindictiveness.

"We didn't really want a girl quite as old. . . ."

"But I'm not really very old, am I, Matron—ma'am—I'm not too old."

"Agatha is sixteen," said Matron.

Joan looked at me, and I nodded vigorously. I felt all the child's emotion, and understood exactly the urgency which she felt to detach herself from the stifling cosmos which had mothered and smothered her.

"Run away for ten minutes, child," said Matron. The girl slowly withdrew, holding Joan with her big somber eyes.

Left alone the three of us talked it over, I making a valiant pretense of being thoroughly grown up and interjecting an occasional very adult comment into the talk of the two women.

Agatha's history was turned up, from the day she had been admitted as a foundling. It was a clean record save for one attack of measles, one attack (mild) of whooping cough, and one abrupt and short lived explosion of temper, which had caused her to tear up sheets and break a window.

"They often do that at that age," said Matron, thoughtfully. "It isn't naughtiness, you know, it's something they can't help. It's partly the change that's taking place in them and partly the sense of being penned in."

I thought of cubs in a zoo suddenly flying at the bars with ineffectual teeth and claws.

"Supposing," said Joan, "supposing she didn't like it—could you take her back?"

"We're not supposed to take them back, but I would always make a place for Agatha. I only fear that she'll be wasted in service. She has a good head."

"Look here, Matron, I'll see that she doesn't slip back. I mean, we can see that she reads and all that kind of thing," I said.

"Well, suppose you try her. When would you want her to come?"

"To-day is Tuesday. Could you let her come Saturday?"

"Yes. You know our rules? We send her with two print frocks and underclothes, from one of our bequests, but we expect some little contribution to the funds. Generally five or six shillings is given. The contribution isn't forced. Then you have to sign a form making a declaration of the kind of work she is going to do, and signed by two householders as testimony that her new home is properly conducted. It's all purely formal. We send a written character with the girl and a copy of her history. We are not entitled to supply an orphan unless we have an assurance that she will be trained in some calling, which means that you are under a moral obligation to make a thorough maid of her, you know."

We listened attentively. There was a quiet knock at the door.

"Come in," called Matron in her patient voice.

Agatha entered looking anxiously from one to the other of us to see how her fate had been settled.

"Agatha, my dear if you really want to go out into the world, Miss—er—Miss Agnew will arrange for you to go to Mrs. Gallus."

There was a quick, audible intake of breath, a lighting up of the two big eyes.

"You will leave on Saturday."

The girl turned to Joan, but was unable to get out the smallest sound of thanks. Joan put an arm round the quivering shoulder.

"You'll be ready, won't you?" The girl nodded. "And we shall expect you."

"And now," said Matron, "I must find a substitute for Agatha in here. Would you care to see over the Institution?"

We declined, with the reservation that at some future time, perhaps . . .

We made our adieu, arranging to come again on the Saturday morning to make the necessary declarations and fill the requisite forms. Agatha was bidden to conduct us to the gates, and led the way down the corridor, down the stairs, and out into the drive. Joan and I followed, not speaking. At the gates the bottle-nosed man with the wooden leg was placidly smoking his pipe on his lodge door-step. The sight of him broke down Agatha's reserve. Forgetting us, and her acquired restraint, she dashed suddenly towards the unprepossessing figure.

"Grim, Grim!" she cried, "I'm going away, I'm going away. Oh, Grim, at last, at last."

Grim—whose name we were soon to learn was Nathan Grimshaw—took the pipe from his lips, and thrust out his head as a tortoise thrusts out a neck from its shell.

"Going away! What—leaving old Nat Grim? Nay, don't tell me." He shook his head doubtingly from side to side.

"I am, Grim, I am." The child, for child she was, was half crazed with excitement.

Grim turned his one-eyed regard to us. He jabbed indicatively at the girl with his pipe stem.

"Are you taking of this one, Master and Miss?"

We said yes to that.

"Well, you've got a treasure. Don't forget. A treasure. I found her. I carried her in. Sixteen years ago. I've watched over her. I shall still watch over her."

He spoke menacingly, like a Puritan's God.

"We've been pals, her and me. Treat her kind."

I have always had an odd strain of the rank senti-

mentalist in me. At that moment it conquered everything else. I moved forward and put out my hand. The old man looked at me for a prolonged moment before responding. Then he drew his palm up and down the side of his green jacket and took my hand.

"No offense meant, Master."

"No offense," I assured him.

"Nathan Grimshaw, Corporal, Eighth of Foot—King's Regiment—now lodge keeper."

It was evidently an introduction. I told him my name and where we were to take his protégée.

"Good 'ome?" he asked.

"A fine home," I ventured to describe it.

"Very good," he said. "Any trouble, any help wanted, any advice to be sought, seek old Nat Grim. Not much of him left, but enough. Leg in Indie, eye in Chinie, but rest of him on parade. Man of few words, Master. No offense."

"No offense," I said again, at which he again wiped his palm and shook my hand.

Joan and I passed out of the gates, Agatha bobbing to us. She had sunk back to her trained reserve. But I guessed that no sooner were we out of sight than she and Nathan Grimshaw, Corporal, Eighth of Foot, King's Regiment, now lodge keeper, would dance a saraband, defying wooden legs to restrict so natural a form of rejoicing.

CHAPTER FIVE

§ 1

SO IT WAS that as Joan's accomplice and under her incentive I became responsible for a new orientation in two young lives. I have never regretted it.

The effect on Marion Mary of her new mode of existence, which was inaugurated the following week, was

little short of miraculous. At one moment she seemed an overgrown child taking the tops of my eggs at breakfast time, and the next she was a stately young woman with a manner. The transition, I suppose, took some weeks, if not months, to make itself really felt, but looking back she seemed no sooner to have joined the staff of Madame Hester than she changed completely.

Until that time, of course, the girl had lived her life between her home in Prosperity Street and the Battle Road Board school. It needed only the right physical moment and a new environment to conjoin and she was transformed from a retarded school-girl into a young woman, and a very comely young woman, too. She was a little flamboyant in her curves, and her bosom was more ample than Greek taste might have approved, but her general effect was one of fresh and healthy English girlhood maturing rapidly into sturdy womanhood. I think the same miracle must have touched Aspasia Winterbottom, for the thin, adenoidic, lanky child that I first saw on her return from her first week in the auction room became very quickly the tall, willowy, golden-haired, provocative beauty who used to make eyes at Peter and me when we encountered her on the stairs or in the street.

Aspasia's father and Pa Gallus would occasionally compare notes on their respective female offspring, Mr. Winterbottom, by reason of his lost voice, being at some disadvantage in the exchanges of mutual and self satisfaction.

"English lily and English rose," would ejaculate Garrick Gallus, flicking his kerchief, and watching the two girls swing up the hilly end of the street, bound, no doubt, on some errand of harmless amorous conquest, and like an obligato would come the hoarse whisper of the burly Benjamin Winterbottom, whose roar had once filled the ring, "Good girls, both."

The coming of Agatha, whom we did our best, without much hope and with no success, to save from degenerat-

ing into Aggie, revolutionized for a while the whole household. She was so strange to everything, and so timidly willing to do whatever we might demand of her, that her presence was for some days a palpable embarrassment. I am convinced that for a while Pa Gallus, with the best will in the world, would address or summon her for the sheer pleasure of seeing her make a dutiful bob, to which he would respond with an elaborate inclination of the head. Ma called her dearie from the start.

If I have only imagined the rapidity with which Marion Mary and her friend Aspasia Winterbottom were transfigured, there is no question that Agatha was changed over-night, thanks to the magic of Joan's eye for beauty and of her fingers for arrangement. The girl came back with us in a cab from the orphanage, a piece of extravagance partly met by the temporary disappearance of Peter's watch, which had gone to provide us with three bottles of Burgundy for a supper party and the change from which paid the cabman and left us with a shilling over. She alighted at number twenty-two in a severe print frock, with a gray cloak and a hard round straw hat, varnished black. When she had divested herself of the outer wraps she was still a pathetic figure in thick worsted stockings, and boots, with her hair drawn back and screwed up.

That night Joan and Peter and I supped in state in the sitting-room, Ma thinking it well that Agatha should at once perceive the distinction between paying guests and the family that lived in the kitchen. I suspect the good woman wanted to ease the child's embarrassment as much as possible. Marion Mary officially waited on us, with Agatha following her to learn the routine.

At the end of the meal, Joan required, as she had done a week earlier, the state of our finances. I was, as we used to say, flush, for I had paid that week's rent in advance and had in my pocket the wages drawn from the *Chronicle* the night before. Peter had a shilling left over from

his watch, six penny stamps, and a silver cigarette case, which he offered to turn into coin at demand. Joan took his last shilling brutally enough, refusing both stamps and case, and levied half a crown from me. (I noticed last week that in the Mansion House list, in aid of the victims of the Inced Pit Disaster, old Peter is down for five hundred pounds, the third biggest donation. I say Peter is down, but the Press acknowledges the sum to a donor calling himself "Sinbad.") Having taken her toll, Joan borrowed Agatha and went, as she declared, shopping. Peter helped himself to five shilings more of my small change and departed with Pa Gallus to a "cave of harmony" at the "Singing Sambo." I was pressed to join them but refused, and settling down I devoted myself to writing a few pages of the book that was to shake the firmament.

How well I recall the writing of that book! It was begun at Ladyport, while I was still a clerk and it was mainly written at 22 Prosperity Street, Headley, being finished there in my combined room late one Sunday night. It went to every publisher in Great Britain and returned in due course to its talented author. Twelve years after its completion my agent pressed me for more work, and finding the despised and rejected manuscript in the drawer of my desk, I had it typed and sent it to him. He placed it immediately, and it has since run to seven editions, the first of which is already collected. I still think it contains some of my best work, but when it was in process of writing none of us doubted that it was saturate with sheer genius. Only with its decisive and repeated rejection did I myself come to have doubts, until one day I reread it and found it perfectly atrocious. It was then, I think, that I cast it into my desk and forgot it for a decade.

But the writing of that book and my steadily increasing command of the *Chronicle*, where Merry and his dyspeptic colleague began, as I shall tell, more and more

to put power into my hands, and the presence of Joan and Peter, and the good fellowship of the Street—Street of Good Hope, did I call it? I must have meant Street of Good Hearts—and the little unexpected treats organized by Ma Gallus, from an unusual meal of trotters to a perfectly preposterous stream of reminiscence delivered over the supper table—these things kept me happy. I may have doubted the goodness of God in after days, but I never doubted it then.

I have already confessed to the strain of rank sentimentality in me. I must keep it in check. What I am now trying to tell you is of the metamorphosis of Agatha.

She and Joan came in from the shopping expedition with bright eyes and an air of suppressed excitement. In the hall, just before Ma's cocoa time, I came across Agatha literally hugging herself with the effort to keep her glee within bounds. I swear she wanted to sing and dance. Joan, when questioned, said she had been rigging the girl up with a few necessities.

The next morning, Joan and Peter and I assembled for our communal breakfast in the usual way. The tray was borne in by a slim girl in black, whose dainty ankles peeped between the hem of her skirt and a pair of neat black shoes. Her soft brown hair was parted in the center and fell curvingly over the broad forehead. Her trim blouse was cut a little low at the neck and displayed a white and graceful throat. Her big eyes danced with pride and delight.

Peter and I could not keep our eyes from her. We followed her movements about the room. And she—she, far from resenting it, took pleasure in our masculine regard. When she went out Peter rose in silence and wrung Joan's hand.

"She's the best thing you've done," he said.

"She does repay a little attention, doesn't she?" said her creator, pouring out the tea. "Ma is giving her an

hour off so that she can show herself to her friend, Nat Grim. She's half wild, you know."

"Can you wonder?" I commented.

Agatha, it seemed, had found her "separate me." She must at that moment, I thought, be feeling particularly, and enviably, real.

§ 2

After all, Agatha's longing in the big orphanage is the longing of us all. What is the secret of endeavor, the spur of ambition, but the intense desire to feel real—to find a separate Me, and impress its importance on the world? To that extent we are all egotists.

For my own part, I was feeling very real during those early days in Prosperity Street. At the office of the newspaper I quickly gained the complete confidence of old John Merry and Richard Chamberlain. I think my youthful zest attracted them, and it would be folly to pretend, in view of my later reputation, that I hadn't a certain talent for political journalism.

Gradually I found myself being allowed to write the first leader, and Merry's pencil scored it less and less with each week that went by. I made a close study of the younger daily papers and began to apply their methods. The art of the business was to transform the old-fashioned pages of the *Headley Chronicle* so slowly that no old subscriber would be affronted. I began by persuading John Merry to title his leading articles with a headline. Then I introduced similar headlines over the various paragraphs of our London Letter. I got hold of our chief sub-editor and using Merry's authority I managed to get the long columns of small print broken up more into paragraphs, and cross-heads inserted. At the end of my first year the sheet was really completely altered. It looked readable, and bright.

I also began to make news of book reviews. Before my advent all books had been reviewed on the fixed day of

the week which starred the special article by "Poetaster" who was Cecil Jones, that terrible minor poet whose works I am glad to say are now completely forgotten. What I did was to take an occasional book and treat it in a special article, with a provocative touch that invited correspondence. About six months after my attachment there was a book by some doctor attacking the administration of lunatic asylums which helped enormously. I managed to get a double-columned heading over the article—this was a revolution—and to write a leader on it. Chamberlain prophesied libel actions, but none followed. What did follow was a certain talk in the town which sent up our circulation a little.

I rushed old Merry into taking a strong and unexpected line on an Education Bill, which caused our party headquarters to grow suddenly interested in our existence, and drew a bitter and sneering speech from one of the two local members. I replied to him in a scathing leader—very jejune, I don't doubt, but effective—and sent quotations to all the London papers, some of whom quoted us with comment. The end of that episode was a visit from the local Chairman of the Light Blues. Merry was an old sportsman and allowed me to do most of the talking.

The local chairman was Sir Andrew Marten, that typical Lodeshire ironmaster. He was a heavy man with old-fashioned mutton-chop whiskers and a tremendous idea of the power of money and the importance of himself. He was inclined to patronize John Merry; and me he addressed at first as if I were a junior clerk. I rather lost my temper with him. I pointed out that all the adherents of the Light Blue cause habitually subscribed to the opposition paper, the *Lodeshire News*, and contented themselves with reading us in the local clubs, and that for all the return we had from our political loyalty in the shape of revenue we might as well turn Buff the following morning. I reminded him that he might be

the chairman of the party but that Mr. Merry was the controller of the paper, and mentioned casually, which was only half true, that my next activity would be to run a series of articles criticizing the local party organization.

Sir Andrew was perturbed. He had assumed that Chamberlain had written the offending leaders and had been prepared to bully him into apology and Merry into withdrawal. I saw in a flash that Richard Chamberlain and John Merry had too long been subservient to the local caucus, the one from sheer temperamental weakness and the other—Merry—from lack of interest. Old John's eyes were shining with silent approval as I spat out my own indignation. The effect on Sir Andrew was marked. He blustered for a while, but after he had realized how things were with me he began, like the business man he was, to conciliate me. He suggested that before I criticized the local organization I should see more of it, and admitted that our line on the Bill was, in a way, justified. If only I or Mr. Merry had consulted him . . . ! Why should we consult him? I asked, and gave him to understand that if either was to woo the other, the paper was not going to be the suitor.

The result of that interview was that I found myself coöpted on to the local Party executive committee. Old John Merry had been a member of it for years, but never attended. With his consent I never missed a meeting. Looking back I cannot honestly to this day say what was my real motive. I wanted to advance the paper, and I wanted to stiffen up the local party, and I wanted to advance the fortunes of that avid ambitionist, Francis Peyton. But more than all else I wanted to be "in at" things. I wanted—to fall back on Agatha's phrase—I wanted to feel real, to find a separate Me.

Before the end of my first year I had established a local reputation as a singularly clever young man with a touch of swollen head. I was regarded as a young man in

a hurry, but a young man just sufficiently dangerous not to be ignored.

Old John Merry was marvelous. He supplied me with the bullets that I fired at committee meetings. He had lived with the party for forty years and more, and had from the first despised the nonentities who comprised it. His own taste was all towards a rural life—he even ran a small farm in the North to which he retired as often as he could—and he had never bestirred himself to change the face of local affairs except impersonally through his paper. But he delighted in doing it by proxy. And when the half-year balance sheet was struck and there was found to be a rise in circulation and a small rise in revenue, he was sportsman enough to credit me with a share in securing both. He took me, I remember, over to his club for a dinner and there announced that my salary would henceforward be four pounds a week. For a young man in the provinces in those days this was plutocratic. It says much that I did not on receiving this unexpected addition to my income even so much as contemplate vacating my combined room in Prosperity Street.

§ 3

Despite my successful assault upon the newspaper and upon the local political party to which it was attached, despite the singleness of mind which had filled me when I first set foot in Headley, it was not my working life which inspired me. It was the queerly assorted household of which I formed a unit in the always mean and now decayed Prosperity Street.

I lost my mother when I was a boy of seventeen. My father had died in my infancy. I had no close relative of whom I was aware except an aunt at Ladyport in whose house I had lived after my mother's death. When I became something of a celebrity in later years an uncle and five first-cousins made themselves known to me from Australia, but if ever I knew of their existence before

that I had forgotten it. It thus befell that Joan and Peter filled a gap in my life and gave me that sense of a friendly audience which we all need as a satisfying incentive to effort.

As the weeks and months passed, two things happened to me, almost imperceptibly. One was that I became hopelessly in love with Joan, and the other was that I became one of a circle of young people all of whom were poor and each of whom was ambitious. We used to meet at each other's diggings or in a rather dingy tea-room behind a pastry cook's shop in the center of Headley. We were a motley group.

There was, first of all, Joan and me—and Peter. There was Lavrin, the young Jewish painter, who, like Joan, eked out a living by means of a part-time attachment to the local school of art. There was his mistress, June Wilmot. Somehow we all thought it gallant and daring that they should be lovers, although we should have been quite unthrilled by their combination had they been married. Lavrin was a consumptive looking youth, with greasy, black hair and he affected a small vandyke and a moustache. He seemed to be at least ten years our elder, although he was actually six months younger than I. June was a tall English blonde, who sang rather sweetly in a soprano voice that was only half trained and who always seemed half asleep. There was Ashington Ablet, who acted as our art critic on the *Chronicle* and had some kind of free-lance connection. He savored of the melodramatic, both in garb and manner, and looked forward to taking London by storm with one of the three-act comedies that he was always engaged upon. There was Hughes, a saturnine little Celt, who wrote verse after the manner of Henley, and Raymond James, his crony, who drew cartoons for an evening paper and hoped fervently that he was destined to replace Phil May. Hughes and James were never seen apart, and neither had been known to achieve a perfectly clean shave. Either their chins were

two days covered with beard, or they had missed a bit, usually at the angle of the jaw or at the point of the chin. We, with childish wit, called them Rouge et Noir, for James' was red and Hughes' was black. There were others whose names I have forgotten, young officials of the Corporation who aspired to write, or young school-mistresses who aspired to paint, or young clerks with a talent for music. All I know is that we were a very friendly, convivial company. We used to go once a week to the theater, standing for half an hour outside the gallery door and then thronging up the stone steps to become an annoyance to everybody until the curtain rose. At first I was rather frightened of my dignity, but when I found that smart, young professional man, Mr. Wass, was a ringleader I lost all scruple.

There were some fierce talks, about Socialism and Roman Catholicism for the most part, and about the necessity for living what Hughes called "a free life." Once we had a properly organized carnival with fancy dresses. Once, when somebody was leaving Headley for another town, we had a dinner, which had perforce to be eaten in morning dress. But what I remember is not the talk or the skylarking or the junketing. That has all faded to a background for Joan—Joan laughing, Joan talking, Joan drawing with charcoal on the tea-shop table-cloths, Joan wrinkling her little nose as Lavrin laid down the law about something on which she disagreed, Joan dressed as a Folly dancing at the Carnival or at some art society's ball, Joan in a hundred circumstances each more endearing than the last.

I lived for Joan. I rose after my mid-morning breakfast anxious to brag myself to her about my work in that day's paper. I waited for her on her school afternoons and walked home with her in a positive fever of delight. I elevated every Saturday to a Saint's day—the feast of Saint Joan. I compared other women, and particularly June Wilmot and the blossoming Aspasia, with Joan, to

their severe disadvantage. I spent my money on little gifts which must have been an embarrassment to her, and longed to conquer the world and present it to her for a pincushion. I grew moody with old Peter, and pathetic in the presence of Ma Gallus, to whom I implied divine despairs that she interpreted as disorders of my digestive apparatus. I went to the cave of harmony at the "Singing Sambo," and when Pony Pleasants sang in a high falsetto a series of ballads about young maidens dying and young men perishing for love, I sat over my bottled stout and felt unutterable things of self-pity. I stayed awake making poems to Joan that I never dared to present to her, and during the daytime I worked on my book, chiefly in order that her name might decorate the dedication. I encouraged Agatha to talk about Joan's excellencies, and doubted this or that quality for the sheer pleasure of hearing the girl heatedly affirm the complete perfection of our joint divinity. I was, in short, as I have said, in love.

I should, of course, have grabbed Joan into my arms some evening and kissed her, or, at least, have spoken out. I did neither, and for the simple reason that honor forbade. She was Peter's. Peter and she were the Adam and Eve of our Eden. I was a mere interloper, whom they tolerated, a *tertium quid*, to whom they were kind. I don't know what Peter felt as he sat in his office waiting for commissions to build town halls and churches and thinking that Joan and I were together, but I know that often in the midst of my own work I would stop abruptly, caught by the thought that he and she were in each other's company. I imagined kisses and the sweet caresses of a tender intimacy. At this period I think my articles must have veered between a shocking and forced tenderness of spirit and a bitter and biting cynicism. I know that I alternated between extreme gloom at the thought that she could never be mine and extreme joy that she existed. I even slew Peter in a variety of ways, chiefly by merciful

accidents, that I might console and win her. . . . I dreaded the day when I should be forced actually to congratulate them. I dreaded still more the day when they would insist upon my being godfather to their first-born. . . .

Sometimes I surprised a peculiar expression of sadness in Joan's eyes, as if she grew tired of waiting for something for which she longed. I dreamt then of speeding Peter's fortunes, of being the god in the machine who would bring them to an affluence sufficient for matrimony. Sometimes she would smile at me as if I were a foolish boy playing at being a man, as if she had some great and all revealing secret to tell me. I used to await then the direct intimation of her approaching marriage, but it never came.

So it was that my first year in Prosperity Street passed, broken only by our separation for a fortnight of the summer, when Joan went to France on her carefully hoarded savings, and Peter and I stayed idle at home. So it was that we came through the months to our first Christmas together.

§ 4

Christmas, you must understand, came upon us as no sudden interruption of the ordinary routine. It was no abrupt festival. It was heralded unmistakably weeks before December the twenty-fifth by the formal opening at the "Singing Sambo" of a Grand Goose Club. Before November was decently dead, the windows of the little shops displayed small cards, either dazzlingly ornate or illiterately simple, urging the neighborhood to "Join Our Christmas Club." The more conservative traders fixed a limit of contributions. To them one paid sixpence or a shilling a week. But there were enterprising retailers who disdained such fixed limits. "Pay what you like and have what you like!" was their inspiring slogan to such of us as found thrift difficult without aids and incentives.

Pony Pleasants' Grand Goose Club was an annex of the Cave of Harmony. Every Saturday the habitués of the "Singing Sambo" trolled out their joys and woes in song, and after consuming much spiritual and liquid refreshment each man placed his florin in a wooden receptacle most cunningly devised in the likeness of a stallion gander. There were twelve members, and the night before Christmas Eve, Pony Pleasants, in a brand new apron, shook up the names in a white, top hat, from which his daughter, carefully blindfolded, drew them. The lucky first man received a thumping goose and none was sent empty away, for the twelfth had for his money and his pains a box of dates, on the label of which a ravishing Turkish damsel disported herself.

The ceremony of drawing was the occasion of exaggerated expressions of good fellowship. In the Cave of Harmony, no man was allowed to pay for his neighbor's drink. The system was that each member on entering placed a two shilling piece in the middle of the big, round table. Drink was served in strict "rounds." If, when the assembly broke up, towards midnight, there was any cash left in the pool, or "kitty" as we called it, being sad dogs much given to the terminology of the gambling hells of which we so often spoke and none of us, I verily believe, had ever seen, there was a solemn bonus, consisting of either matches or cigarettes. Since most of the members smoked very masculine pipes, Pony's daughter had evolved a system of her own, whereby a certain number of cigarettes could be exchanged for pipe tobacco.

On the twenty-third of December, the Cave assembled at seven-thirty, Mr. Pony Pleasants in the chair. The members being present in full strength and the glasses charged, the chairman rose, knocked three times impressively on the table with an auctioneer's gavel, and called upon the member on his right for a little 'armony. The member on his right being old Timpany, the grocer, there followed a pathetic rendering of that fine old English

ballad, "The Lass with a Delicate Air," well sung, for old Timpany was still a shining member of the choir at St. Augustine's Church. He having finished his little 'armony, the Chairman again rose and addressed his Vice, Mr. Garrick Gallus, in the following words.

"Mr. Vice, a very nice little 'armony."

Mr. Vice, without rising, responded.

"Very nice little 'armony indeed, Mr. Chairman."

"Mr. Vice, perhaps the member on your right will suggest a sentiment to follow that very nice little 'armony."

The member on the right of Mr. Vice, being old Peter, a trim figure in an elegant suit of navy blue, then rose and lifting his glass, said in bold and manly tones.

"Mr. Chairman, may we live as long as we like, and like as long as we live."

The company honored the sentiment. Then the Chairman in his falsetto led us all in the singing of that time-honored anthem,

"It's a very nice song,
And it's very well sung,
Jolly companions every one,
Those who can mend it are welcome to try,
But always remember the singer is dry."

After which the procedure was repeated with the member on the left of the Chair, and so on alternately down the table until all except Mr. Chair and Mr. Vice had contributed to the evening's entertainment. Then Mr. Vice rose and said,

"Mr. Chairman, having had so many nice little 'armonies, perhaps you would favor the company?"

Mr. Chairman then favored the company with a ballad about some fields of white cotton, where he had once courted sweet Maisie, before the cruel war, and grew very tremoloso agitato about the angels who now numbered that unfortunate young lady within their bright ranks above. When the applause had subsided, he called upon

Mr. Vice, and Pa Gallus, asking leave to substitute for a song some elocutionary entertainment, ruffled his hair, turned up his coat collar, and gave a thrilling impersonation of Fagin's last night in the condemned cell.

Then came the draw. Number twenty-two was highly favored by the Fates, for Pa drew the "thumping goose," I secured a pair of rabbits, and Peter had a bottle of rum. Pansy Pleasants then imposed a levy of a penny per member in aid of some society or another—to provide boots for poor children, I fancy—and after a last round and a distribution of cigarettes and matches, we went our several ways, Pa Gallus hooking the legs of his goose on to the crook of his walking stick, from whence it dangled ludicrously and uncomfortably down his back as he walked, inspiring him to a brave rendering of "Philadelphia in the Morning."

What fools we all were, but what good fellows we seemed to each other. The quiet deference paid to Peter and me as men of education, the general sense of jollity and light-heartedness, the posturing of Pa Gallus and the wild inconsequence of the talk—these things come back to me over the years. I sometimes think that Pony Pleasants was no man, but a cosmic emanation, that he was of the retinue of Pan, and that his daughter, significantly named Pansy, returned again to vine wreath and leopard skin after we departed. There was that which informed our gatherings which I have never again found in assemblies of men—a spirit of sheer gladness. We were glad to be alive, glad to be together, glad to have palates capable of savoring the clean bitterness of ale, glad to have voices to raise. I even believe that Wormald, the ironmonger, was glad to be insolvent, since it gave an extra thrill to what might otherwise have been a dull and illiberal life of placidity. And beyond all doubt Pa Gallus was glad to be Pa Gallus. As he walked home that night he gloried in his identity, singing his triumph to the stars

with an Irish brogue, which no Irishman would have understood.

"With me bundle on me shoulderrrr
Sure there's no man could be boulderrrr,"

he trolled out, and passers-by or loiterers on doorsteps gave him greeting full of neighborly affection. Falling back to light my too-tightly crammed pipe, I heard a young lover say to his lass, as he followed the singing histrion with venerating eyes,

"'Sbin a nactor, 'e 'as."

Peter and I trod in his reflected glory, feeling rather ashamed of him and not too proud of ourselves, for the night air had made certain what we had inwardly denied in the "Singing Sambo." We were, like it or not, decidedly one over the eight. The first conviction that a rather elevated and inebriated Pa Gallus was being seen home by two sober, staid, and vastly superior, young men was not tenable. I abandoned it fully and frankly. I even went to the length of telling a passing stranger, who wanted a match, that we were three bline mish. I remember that the stranger said that for himself, he was a Royal, Ancient, and Antediluvian Bi-hic-bi-hic-bi-hic-bison.

As we turned the corner of Prosperity Street, we assumed a monstrous caution. Pa Gallus became anxious that the beauty sleep of his good lady, than whom, he ventured to inform us, no better woman trod God's sweet earth, should not be disturbed by our riotous entry into that dismal hovel into which the malig-malig-malig-, into which the malig-malig-, into which the malignity of fate had forced him to spend the evening of his penurious but not insolvent days. Having said which, he repeated in a whisper, four times and very slowly, the word malignity.

Peter and I needed no injunctions. We were obsessed by the vision of Joan—Joan standing in the hall, eyeing us despisingly. It was, I imagined, about ten o'clock.

When the door opened and the cream-faced loon of a hall clock showed the morning to be advanced in the small hours, I was a little relieved, for Joan would be in bed. I stood by the crazy bamboo hat rack meditating a means of ascending the stairs without disturbing her.

I was myself disturbed in my meditation by the sight of Pa Gallus standing at the head of the kitchen stairs beckoning to us. With some temerity we essayed the descent in his wake.

"Cup of hot tea," he said, sagaciously. Peter and I sat in chairs on either side of the range until our host had brewed the drink from the kettle which he had found sizzling on the hob. I remember realizing that Ma Gallus must before retiring have deduced our need.

Our conversation was rather limited. It consisted in passing encomiums upon our fellow members of the Cave of Harmony.

"A good fellow, Timpany," Pa Gallus would say.

"One of the best," Peter would intone in response and I would come in rather late with a "jolly good fellow."

There would be a pause.

"A good fellow, Wormald."

"One of the best."

"Jolly good fellow."

So the litany went on. I think our second cup of tea must have counteracted the effect of the night air, for when we went up to bed all seemed normal with the world, except for the iron band that had encompassed my forehead behind the eyes, upon which imps hammered until my eyeballs felt red-hot.

Peter, with a guttering candle in his hand, halted me at his door.

"Good night, Dogsboddy," he said solemnly.

"Good night, Sinbad," I said.

"Musen let her know," he said.

"No," I answered.

"Wooden do."

"Wooden do tall."

"Good night."

"Good night." Something prompted me to unusual courage. "I say, Sinbad!"

"Yes?"

"You're lucky fellow."

"I am—why?"

"You—and Jimbo."

He held the candle close to my face, trying, I think, to see if I jested with him.

"What do you mean, me and Jimbo?"

"Aren't you going to marry Jimbo?"

"I—marry Jimbo!"

"Peter, don't you—don't you—" I boggled at the words, they seemed so utterly sentimental and false, "don't you love her?"

"Love her? Of course I love her. Don't we all love her? But you don't think Jimbo would look twice at me, do you? Why, man, it's you that Jimbo cares about, damn you, I mean bless you. Lucky! I'm the unluckiest fellow in Christendom."

He turned into his room, and I followed him.

He sat on the edge of his bed, his hat still balanced on the crown of his curly head. I stood before him.

"But I thought—" I began.

"You thought what? I tell you, Jimbo doesn't care a toss for me. Not that way. Why should she? What use am I to anybody? I'm a boozing, swearing, light living, failure. I'm a bad hat. 'I'm a rolling rag of poverty and the son of a gambolier.' Oh, yes I am, Dogsboddy. What Jimbo wants is an earnest sort of fellow like you. She wants somebody she can mother a bit. She doesn't want any hit-or-miss, all-the-same-in-a-hundred-years, come-day-go-day, what-a-hell-of-a-larkish fellow like me. I tell you I'm nothing to Jimbo and Jimbo's nothing to me—except a fine little pal. Now get off to bed, you moon-struck owl, I'm going to sleep."

I turned dazed by his words, and went to the door, where he arrested me by uttering my name. His tone now was sober and intent.

"Peyton!"

"Yes."

"I like you."

"I know you do."

"Yes—but, by God, if you worry that girl, I'll break your silly, white neck for you."

I laughed at him.

"Don't be a damned ass, Peter," I said.

"Sorry, Dogsbody. I'm not quite compos—what's-its-name—after that goose club. Good night."

I went slowly to my own room. If Peter was right, then all was well. To-morrow I would speak out to Jimbo.

"He either fears his fate too much,
Or his deserts are small,
Who dares not put it to the touch,
To win or lose it all,"

I said to my reflection in the mirror. Then I tried to cool my forehead on the cold looking-glass. What thoughts went through my aching head after that I cannot remember. But I know that when I awoke on Christmas Eve, my hot eyes rolled in pits of fire and the iron band had contracted, while the imps hammered away behind my forehead incessantly. Never in all the wide world had a lover felt so little like making a declaration of his passion.

And Jimbo—good old Jimbo—guessing how things were with her two pals, poured out our breakfast tea and maintained a merciful silence through the meal. But now and again I caught her smiling to herself, as a mother smiles at the two shamed faces of her mischief-trapped sons. That morning Pa Gallus refrained from telling the neighborhood from his bathroom window that he was king of the forest glade, but we heard him lamenting to

the hat-rack that the great Almighty had placed his canon 'gainst self-slaughter, and we heard him from the front door steps inform his friend Mr. Winterbottom that Prosperity Street was a corrupted garden, and that things rank and gross in nature possessed it. I am inclined to think that Mr. Winterbottom half construed this as a personal reflection, for as Pa receded down the street the ex-bookmaker stood scratching a puzzled head and glaring balefully after his eccentric friend. Then, with a shake of the still puzzled cranium, he turned into his own house.

CHAPTER SIX

§ 1

THAT AFTERNOON Joan and I went for a long walk. I need not say with what ingenuous artifice I hid my real motives in persuading her to abandon Ma Gallus, who was in the midst of the preparations for to-morrow's feast. I think I made most play with the appeal of the clear frosty weather. But she came—and we went out together along Battle Road and past the Home, where old Nat Grim hailed us to give us the compliments of the season. It was with his benediction ringing in our ears that we reached at last the open country, that travesty of grass land which lay between Headley and the real moorland.

"You're very quiet to-day, Dogsboddy," she said.

"Am I?"

I did not know how to broach the all-important topic. After another pause I said,

"I had a talk with Sinbad last night."

"Don't you always have a talk with Sinbad?"

"Listen, Jimbo," I entreated her. "I want to say something that's terribly hard to say. Ever since I came I've

thought that you and Sinbad were—were—were in love with each other. I know he's in love with you."

She was walking now with downcast eyes and her cheeks had mounted the scarlet that so often flew to her sweet face.

"Joan, dear, I can't go on as we have been going on. I'm trying to tell you that I love you, too, that I worship you, that I—oh, Joan, dear, is there any hope at all for me? I know I'm not a very attractive kind of fellow, but I mean to do great things, I mean——"

Heaven forgive me the boasting of youth! I wooed her as if I were a tradesman trying to tempt her to buy me. I pictured for her the place I would make for her in the world.

She slipped her hand into mine as we walked, and my words ended. For a little space we were silent.

"Joan?" I said at last.

She looked up. Her eyes were bright, as if she were about to cry, but there was no question in my mind of how she felt towards me. Her face was radiant.

We stopped abruptly, there in the long country road, and I put my two clumsy hands on her shoulders. She hid her face in my rough great-coat. "Then you do care?" I said. She nodded, and I lifted her face to mine and kissed her.

Had anyone passed us we would have looked a vulgar enough pair, I don't doubt, a young and shabby boy embracing his beloved in the full light of day with neither shame nor reserve; but much we cared how we might look. And nobody did pass us. When a distant governess car with a load of small children in charge of a groom came within eyeshot we were again walking sedately together, held in a silence that neither dared to break.

§ 2

Life is never so kind as art. We should have had a field of asphodel, or a singing river, or a sun-kissed glade. We

had instead a dusty road, and an ugly red-brick inn. For as we walked we reached the "Chained Bull," which announced its horrid self as a good pull-up for carters. Why we turned into its dingy portals I don't know, unless it was an instinctive need for privacy which drove us from the highway.

A pleasant woman came to us in the little tap-room, and told us that the weather was seasonable, and that we should have snow before evening. Behind her trailed a small child, of indeterminate sex, but with a far too obvious cold in the nose. Joan knelt and ministered to this small excuse for hiding her head.

I asked if we could have some tea, and was told that we could have "tea and amaneggs, or teaandplainbreadan-butterwivcake, or tea and cole meat." We decided that tea and plainbreadanbutterwivcake was what we really needed. The woman, being honest and wishing to warn me of the extent to which I pledged my credit, said that it would be sixpence each, but assured me that I could have any hot water I required. I thanked her and she retired with her child. I was all but encircling Joan for another of the most marvelous kisses in creation, when the woman returned and said we could have a fresh balm cake if we liked. We did like.

So my memory of my first real wooing of Joan is all mixed up with the smell of ale and fresh balm cake. Even now I have only to pass a baker's door when balm cakes are hot on the counter to be transported again to that little room with its three round scrubbed tables and its varnished bar, and to find myself sitting again eyeing a transfigured Joan and feeling my heart pounding and beating at my throat with the sheer ecstasy of my love for her.

I don't think we talked very much, but yet we seemed to discuss so many things. We spoke of my dilatoriness, and I explained my mistaken loyalty to old Peter—old Peter, who was two years my senior, being a disillusioned

man of twenty-five whose wasted years had robbed him of this divinity. We spoke of our future and of how some day we should have a salon in London and be mutually great. We spoke of the wonder of our finding each other, of the kindly fate which had brought us together, of the eternity of our love, of all those things which every pair of lovelorn children have spoken since the world began and Adam paired with Eve that Spring in Eden.

We were happy. Even the fresh balm cake seemed to have been dipped in the honey of the gods. And in the gathering dusk of the late afternoon we walked back to the mean little house that sheltered us, an abode blessed beyond all other dwellings.

Everyone seemed somehow to be aware of our changed relationship. There was nothing said, but Ma Gallus came into the sitting-room to lay the supper table and told us in tremendous detail the story of her own wooing, and Agatha beamed on us with her big, worshipping eyes, and Marion Mary stopped Joan in the hall and wished her a Merry Christmas and unexpectedly kissed her, and Pa Gallus—Pa Gallus excelled himself, for he made a series of entries in order to recite a few stanzas from "Locksley Hall" in which the late Laureate had indicated the relationship of husband and wife, a long passage from *The Taming of the Shrew* in which Kate defines wifely duty, a line or two from *Hiawatha* comparing men and women to bows and cords, and a considerable portion of the Song of Songs. He then produced from a sideboard drawer an ancient photograph of a slim young woman in tights and invited us to guess her identity. On our failing to do so he informed us with manly pride that it was a photograph of the good lady in pantomime, with the added reminder that no better woman trod God's good earth.

It was Peter whom I feared to face, but Peter, like the Briton he was, and is, took it well. He came in from the office to which clients so rarely came and sensed at once that something had befallen us.

"You've done it?" he said, and I nodded, whereat he took my hand and almost wrung it off in his fervor. I stood stockstill, grinning at him like a Cheshire cat.

"A long time you've been about it!" he chided me, "and that child eating her heart out."

"But, Sinbad, I thought . . ."

"You thought! Dammit, you're not supposed to think: you're a journalist. Well, I'm jolly glad. And here she comes. Hello, Jimbo, how goes it?"

"All quiet on the Potomac, Sinbad."

"Don't lie to me, Jimbo. You're a wicked young woman. Leading men on."

"He's told you?"

"Dash it— isn't it obvious? Look at the silly loon."

"He isn't a loon."

"Yes he is. A dashed, great, gawping loon. I hate him. I hope you give him hell."

"Now, Sinbad. No language. Aren't you glad, really?"

"Look here, Jimbo, don't let's talk of it. I like you both. You're good fellows, such as you are. But you're neither of you worthy of the other fellow—an', besides, I wanted you myself. Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Only I knew that I wasn't the right fellow, and as soon as that lout came it was obvious that he was."

"Don't call him a lout. He's my intended, bless him. We're walking out, aren't we, Dogsboddy? Keepin' company, we are." She came and adjusted my tie, possessively.

"Well, let's eat. And I'll tell you both something really exciting."

We clamored to be told.

"I'm a made man." He had drawn his chair to the table and was slicing away at a tongue that Ma had bought for us. Tongue was one of Peter's little weaknesses and Peter was a little weakness of Ma's, so that we had tongue about every third night. Joan settled herself at the head

of the table and poured out, and I sat opposite to Sinbad and almost tore my fingers off trying to open a jar of somebody's patent chutney.

"What's it all about?" I asked.

"You know how I sweated over the plans for the new Town Hall? Well——" His eyes danced.

"You haven't pulled it off, Sinbad?"

He let all restraint go and fairly shouted the answering yes. The next minute we were dancing round the table like lunatics.

Months before, the Corporation had selected a panel of local architects to submit plans for a new block of civic buildings. By dint of some lobbying and a little pocket diplomacy Peter had managed to scrape a place amongst the selected seven local firms. His ardor had been a little damped when he learned that the Council reserved the right to reject all the seven plans in favor of those of some London architect, but he had—as he elegantly phrased it—sweated away at his own conception. The plans had been in for some weeks and the result of the Council's deliberations was not to be officially known until they met for their January meeting in the new year. Peter had dismissed all thought of the fate of his own efforts, or had seemed to do so, and his news now was a bombshell. When he had settled down again he told us of a friendly call from the Town Clerk and of a piece of information given in deadly confidence.

"It's a great world, you know," he said, his mouth full of bread and butter. "There was old Franklin actually coming in to tell me this because he thought it would give me a happy Christmas. Here am I, a ragged sort of local tradesman, as far as he's concerned, and yet he breaks the seal of official knowledge and goes to no end of trouble just to back me up."

"What did you say to him, Sinbad?"

"I really don't know. I've always flattered myself that I'm a cool customer, very impassive sort of fellow and

all that kind of professional pose, but I've no more idea what I said to old Franklin when he told me than I have what he said to me. I only know the decent old boy took me off to the Headley Club and opened a bottle of fizz, like a sportsman. He's amazingly human. Oh yes, he said that he remembered how he felt when the news came that he was first in England on the Law Society's examination twenty years ago and he wanted to see how other people took good news. He said he got beastly drunk."

"Why do you call him old—he can only be about forty-two," I said.

"Isn't that old?" said Peter, honestly believing that it was next door to senility.

"When is it to be made public?"

"Not for a fortnight. I shall be walking about positively bursting with pride and not able to tell a soul."

"It'll be worse for me," I assured him. "Here am I with a local scoop and mustn't say a word about it. I suppose the *Lodeshire News* will worm it out of some fat Town Councilor, and we'll be left as usual."

"Don't you believe it. It'll be faithfully kept until the right moment."

"Isn't it perfectly splendid!" said Joan. "Now we can have an absolutely rippin' Christmas with everybody bubbling over."

"Looking back, I only hope that I displayed as little envy of Peter's good fortune as he of mine."

§ 3

I wish I could halt my story to tell of how Prosperity Street spent its Christmas day; of how neighbors came a-visiting; of what presents were exchanged; of how we all assembled in the sitting-room at one o'clock precisely to eat the "thumping goose" that Pa Gallus had drawn, and the pudding that Ma Gallus had made, and the mince pies that Joan had made, and the rum sauce that Marion Mary had made, and the apple sauce and sage and onion

stuffing that Agatha had made; of how we admired the decorations and the holly that Sinbad and Jimbo and I had put up on Christmas Eve; of how the three of us went for a long walk and came back to a Christmas tea of dimensions to equal the one o'clock dinner, with a cake three tiers high, iced by Ma Gallus's own hands; and of how Vera Popplewell, the lame girl from the dairy, came in and worshipped Joan so visibly that I loved her on the spot. I would like, I say, to halt my story and tell of these things, and of how we welcomed in the New Year with cheap claret and sugared biscuits, but I must not. I must not even tell of our excursion on Boxing Day to the Orphanage to take toys and sweets, and tobacco for old Nat Grim, and of the lecture he delivered to his protégée, Agatha, on her fitting deportment as a young lady of fashion.

If I stay my tale to tell of these things I shall never leave that idyllic time, for I could crowd my pages with the dear details of a dreaming boy's bewitched life and there would be neither space nor patience left for the telling of what came after. Looking back over that spring and summer I seem to have moved in a transfigured world in which all went well with me, and little went ill with anyone else about me. It was not only that we youngsters were happy, as we could not but be happy, with our ambitions beginning to take shape and our fates moving, as we thought, to such desirable ends. It was that everyone in that little cosmos of which we were but temporary units seemed equally happy, or, at worst, blessed with a kind of sunny contentment.

It was not that Prosperity Street knew no tragedies, or that in facing them it showed itself devoid of feeling or humanity. Never since, indeed, have I moved amongst people of such ready and genuine sympathy for misfortune, a sympathy even too prone to translate itself into offers of material help, since insistent aid can become embarrassment both to him who offers and to him who

refuses. But tragedy, whether the final tragedy of death or the minor catastrophe of what by our scale was ruin or disgrace, was rightly regarded by us all as an interruption of the major mood of life. The positive sense of sheer gladness which informed the merry gatherings of the Cave of Harmony and the Grand Goose Club was almost as potent, as it seemed to me then, and seems to me still, in our daily lives and relationships.

We being already on that queer border-line between a definite social "position," however humble, and a cheerfully recognized nonentity, little could happen to perturb us. Those who by long usage regarded Prosperity Street, and its stratum, as their natural and foreordained habitat, might sing with Bunyan, "He who is down need fear no fall, he who is low no pride," and those of us who were the temporary sojourners there, held back, as we complacently thought, from a better and more fitting milieu only by the poverty of youth, knew that a mishap so early in a career could be repaired, and would, in fact, be only another incentive to achievement. So we were happy.

And in that general and almost serene atmosphere of all-rightness we had, each of us, our individual and personal causes for contentment. As Ma and Pa Gallus tasted a kind of subdued ecstasy in the thought of Marion Mary, as our transformed Agatha thrilled to each new discovery of her real self, as the little lame girl from the dairy rejoiced in the kindly friendship of Joan, so Peter from his triumphs in his profession and I in my steady progress and my love, found life like a heady wine, which we quaffed in great gulps of almost physical abandon. And Joan—Joan, I know, was the happiest of us all.

What I shall never recapture on paper is Joan the girl in all her gracious, laughing charm. Nothing that she said, nothing that she did, simply recorded, would convey the vibrant radiance of her comradeship. In the days when we still read Mrs. Browning I used to think that "My Kate" was not unlike Joan. There *is* a likeness, only

Joan did say "much that could act as a thought or suggestion," and she did "attract in the sense of the brilliant or wise." But she did not, in any way, charge her quick utterances with any air of portentousness, or of self-conscious wisdom. Her wisdom, when it came, was laughed out, as if it were the lightest nonsense. She could be serious enough on occasion, and then I thought her the more adorable—boy that I was—as her eyes grew troubled with thought and her proud little chin thrust itself a little forward to symbol her determination. I have already said of her that she had herself a boyish quality of poise and figure: she had, too, a blithe boy's spirit. And in our little world, where kindness was first nature, she was the kindest of us all.

If I seem, in writing of her so, to be a sensualist of sentimentality, a mere epicure of my own vapid emotions, it cannot be helped. I really was sentimental about her then, and I am sentimental about her now. If I tried to speak of her with restraint, I should be false to myself and her. She utterly filled me. I woke to worship Joan: I worked to glorify Joan: I went to sleep in an ecstasy of gratitude to the Good God for His gift of Joan. And the rest of the household, as I saw them, were there to magnify and minister to Joan. I can only hope, I can only think, that we repaid them all for their endurance of our lovelorn antics by the amusement we must have afforded to them, or, if not by the amusement, by the tender moods we induced in them, for fat Ma Gallus and plump Marion Mary, and shy Agatha would beam on us, Pa would orate at us, and Peter would sometimes look at us with a whimsical smile that was not, I knew, altogether free from friendly envy, an envy which, cub and ingrate that I must have been, frankly added to my happiness and self-esteem.

§ 4

I was, you see, perfectly insufferable, perhaps even a little detestable. But I was not insufferable to Joan. She, at least, was far from detesting me. All through those Spring and Autumn months we made love according to the immemorial usage. Joan was incarnate chastity, but she was not passionless, and I, you may conceive, was ardent enough. The blackbird's box-wood flute sang our hearts and lips together as we wandered the wolds and woods beyond the outer rim of the straggling town, but we little needed his obligato to our wooing. Snatched kisses in the dim lighted hall of the little house had their own magic; and no guilty encounter in the Venusberg had more rapture than our innocent embraces in the little parlor when Peter was safely out of the way. We held hands like children as we came up the dark road or sat enthroned in the cheap seats of the local theater. We went to endless trouble and stratagems to secure the back seats of tramcars. We even went first-class on the railway in the hope, too often vain, of obtaining a snatch of privacy in which to adore each other. Once, I remember with a thrill of gratitude, a nice old clergyman entered a railway carriage, and to our infinite relief left it at the next station; but we saw him again at the Headley terminus, and guessed that some memory of his own youth had prompted him not to play gooseberry.

"To play gooseberry"—even that old term—that, to me, almost forgotten idiom—brings back the savor of my wooing. I like to think that I, too, remembering Joan and me, have sometimes vacated a railway carriage and have sometimes, at dances and receptions, gone a circuitous route to another room rather than disturb the enrap't forms in the passages and the conservatory.

We planned, as you may guess, wonderful futures. We each of us shyly embodied our fondest day-dreams in words for the other to share. I was to be great, and men

were to acknowledge my greatness, and Joan was to be always with me, the perfect hostess, the kudos-sharer. She, too, was to be great, but in a quieter way. Her greatness, I fear, was largely to hang upon a few masterpieces, done in the intervals of sharing my own stupendous fame. I think we agreed that, with such parents, our son would be a genius. I am not sure of this, but I certainly remember that we anticipated children of no uncommon gifts. . . .

It was not all idyl. We had our moments of despair. We quarreled. Once, I recall, it was over a vexed question of pickled pork. Once it was over a red-haired girl in a tobacco shop. And once, the bitterest breach of all, lasting almost a whole week, it was over an art master, to whose dandified ways I took manly exception, and to whose vile charms I felt Joan had a little succumbed. Poor dandified art master! I doubt if he ever knew to what dooms he was being consigned as he talked with her in the School of Art while I fumed and fretted on the steps, imagining the worst. He was, I must admit, always extremely nice to me, if a little too patronizing. Peace to his ashes, wherever they may rest, for he gave us a reconciliation transcending even our original love-lunacy.

So in this high mood of wooing, and of hard work, for I was writing with desperate intent and shouldering every burden the newspaper could find for my willing shoulders, the year wore on towards its autumn. October that year came in with a succession of sunny days, which were followed by a week of thick fogs, so fittingly allegorical that I am sure of their sequence as I recall them. But the fogs had yet to come and the day was pallidly bright when I had the first hint of the impending trouble that was to drive me from Prosperity Street and change the whole course of our lives.

CHAPTER SEVEN

§ 1

SATURDAY WAS the real feast day of our plebeian week, for I was free of the office and Joan of her art classes and decorative work. On the day that I had the first foreboding of ill she and I had been to an Autumn Exhibition of modern painters. Peter Wass, in a sudden fit of conscious masculinity, had refused to accompany us and had gone to a football match. We had arranged to meet for tea at a little café in the town and to wind up the evening by indulging ourselves to a concert at which some celebrity could be heard for a very modest outlay.

The exhibition had been good, judged by our then standards, and the sharp walk from the gallery to the café had left us glowing and hungry. Peter was a little late, but by the time we had maneuvered a table closer to the fire and had given an order for tea and muffins and cakes he arrived. He came striding into the cozy little room, looking, as usual, a miracle of good dressing in his long overcoat, which disclosed an almost meticulous collar and cravat and perfectly pressed trousers falling over wantonly extravagant boots. It was obvious why his coterie called him "the aristocrat" and he made me feel, as he always did, a scrubby, grubby provincial. He flung down an evening paper, shed his great-coat and gloves, stopped to warm his well-kept hands at the fire, turned to survey us, and greeted us with a volley of chaff, to which we adequately responded, I do not doubt. He approved our order and within a few seconds we were grouped round the little table. He had had, he told us, an amusing encounter. (Dear old Peter, he was always having amusing encounters.) Some affable stranger, who had stood on his feet during most of the match, had engaged him in conversation as they filed out of the gates

of the football ground, and had shared a seat with him on the tramcar.

"He was a big man," said Peter. "Looked like a sergeant-major. Swore he'd met me somewhere before. I swore he hadn't. I thought at first he was a kind of a confidence trickster, but he wasn't. He was quite a genial, pleasant sort of fellow. When we got off the tram he said, quite naturally and in a friendly kind of way, 'Are you sure I haven't met you before? I'm a warder at Anstead Gaol.'"

Peter laughed at the thought of his ingenuous interlocutor and I chuckled, but Joan was not amused.

"How horrid," she said, with a little shudder.

"Horrid? I thought it was dashed funny."

"Your sense of humor's morbid, Sinbad," she told him, and he apologized gravely, and began to talk of the match, of which he made a kind of fool's saga, presenting himself as an innocent in a world of intolerant sophisticates. He had the enviable knack of being able to render all his most commonplace experiences as excitements or farces. It was due, I think, to an unusually quick observation and a talent for skilful exaggeration of detail. He told us nothing of the game that had been played, but he conveyed the sense of the massed crowds, the good fellowship of partisans, the contretemps that befall humanity assembled in bulk.

"Who won?" I asked.

"I dunno. But it's probably in the evening paper."

Joan picked up the news sheet he had discarded and glanced at the smudgy print in the stop-press column.

"Headley two, Salchester nil," she read, and began to look over the other pages of the paper. Sinbad and I stolidly consumed cakes and talked over her unheeding head.

"More tea, Jimbo?" he demanded at last.

She did not hear him. She sat holding the paper on her knee, but with her eyes gazing to the floor beyond it. Her

color had ebbed away and her mouth had tightened into a grim little line.

"Joan!" I cried, but Peter jumped to his feet and moved to her.

"What's the matter, Jimbo? Are you ill?" he asked.

She started, then, like a child disturbed in a day-dream.

"No . . . No . . ." she said slowly. "It's all right. It's quite all right. I was wool-gathering."

She laughed, a little awkwardly, caught her breath in a sigh, smiled at us both, and took up the tea-pot.

"Are you all right, really, Joan?" I asked, sick with sudden anxiety.

"Quite all right, Frank," she said, using my christian name, as she did when we were serious. "Please don't worry. It was stupid of me."

I was not satisfied, nor was Peter, but as she obviously wished us not to dwell on the matter, we let it go.

When she went to the cloak room to tidy her hair for the concert I said to him:

"I suppose she is all right?"

"As right as a trivet, Dogsboddy. You know what women are. Probably felt a bit faint or something, and didn't like to admit it."

"Not she," I said. "She was upset by something, and something she had seen in the paper."

"I wonder?" he said, a new light coming into his eyes.

"I'm sure. When we get home we'll look."

I crammed the sheet into my overcoat pocket, lest Joan should return to find us peering at it.

She rejoined us apparently bubbling over with high spirits, but her mood seemed to me forced and unnatural, and she returned every now and again to her abstracted and almost tragic survey of the ground before her, seeing there I knew not what. Glancing at her profile as we sat on the narrow chairs of the concert hall I was perturbed and worried, she was so palpably harassed. She seemed

almost to have aged a decade since we had waited for Sinbad in the tea-rooms.

And then, either by some effort of will or by her natural buoyancy, or because she had found a decision in her trouble, she flung off her depression. As we walked home she was the laughing Jimbo again. When I said good-night to her it was almost as if she tried to comfort me, rather than that I tried to solace her. I wondered, as she went up the stairs, if I had not been utterly mistaken, and Peter, after all, perfectly right in supposing that some momentary faintness had alone caused her sudden dolorous mood and her sudden loss of color.

When I searched the newspaper I could find nothing which seemed to have any possible connection, however remote, with Joan Agnew of Prosperity Street and the Headley School of Art.

§ 2

Throughout these early days of my wooing I was still absorbed in my work on the *Chronicle*, my natural instinct for finding satisfaction in a complete abandonment of every faculty to the interest nearest to my mind being reinforced and stimulated now by the extra incentive to ambition which the mere thought of Joan gave to every moment of my waking day. Each night I sat with old John Merry and Richard Chamberlain, and each night I widened my scope and increased my hold, as it were, of the direction of the paper. They trusted me, and at their ages there must have been both an inclination to allow a younger man to relieve them of some of their old routine and a slightly cynical satisfaction at the sight of so much enthusiasm for work which to them had lost its glamor, save in those moments which stirred them to re-create, chiefly for my benefit, their older dreams of power.

Chamberlain during that summer had developed a hacking cough, which distressed his old friend and chief, and even at times perturbed me, who had less reason to

regard his health with the watchful anxiety of the elder man.

"Your cough's bad to-night, Dick," would say old John, gazing at his lean colleague through his monocle and stroking his deep beard as if he had cast himself as the family doctor in some play.

"Cough! Nonsense. It's that foul chimney. I walked fifteen miles to-day and haven't coughed once until I came into this room."

"Are you seeing anybody?"

"Seeing anybody? Why should I see anybody? I'm all right. Throat's a bit raw, perhaps, but that's because this bacca's gone off since the firm changed hands. What are you writing on, Peyton?"

Such, with but small variation, was the duologue which came to be a nightly recital. Sometimes it was the fog and sometimes it was the dust which had caused Chamberlain to cough, but never was it any affection which was worth a consultation with his doctor. I began to take the cough as part of the office furniture, and even Mr. Merry's protests and inquiries grew almost automatic and without real concern behind them. I think we were both surprised when Chamberlain sent down a message one night to say that he had at last seen a doctor, who, like the fool Chamberlain had always suspected him to be, had ordered the sceptical patient to bed for an indefinite period.

Merry passed the note over to me without comment. I read it and held it for a moment in my hand.

"Well?" said he.

"He must be worse than we thought," I hazarded.

"Never known old Dick to take to his bed all the years I've known him."

"It is probably only a chill of some kind."

"I'm worried, boy. I'm worried. I'd better go up and see him. Can you manage for an hour or two?"

I could hardly tell him that I was cheerfully prepared to take charge single-handed for the rest of my lifetime,

but I conveyed to him that I thought I might survive an hour or two of sole control.

He came back later in the evening looking, himself, as if the hand of fate were on him. It was almost incredible that the gaunt, pessimistical Chamberlain should so have captured the affection of this big fox-hunting man that his mere indisposition reacted like a blight. Under the craggy eyebrows old John Merry's blue eyes were positively filmed with tears, his rosy cheeks had paled, and the portly form was no longer carried with assurance.

As he came back into our room I rose hurriedly, so startled was I by the change in his bearing. He took off his hat and great-coat, made his way to his accustomed chair, and sank heavily down.

"He's finished, boy. Poor old Dick is finished," he said.

"You don't mean . . .?"

"No, not dead. But finished. He'll never get up again. We've seen the last of him here. Forty years—and finished."

"You can't mean that. You must have seen him at a bad moment."

"I've seen his doctor, too. He's done. You wouldn't know him if you saw him propped up there in bed in that checked nightshirt he wears. He never had any taste in clothes, old Dick. There's nothing of him. He's been living on his will all these last few years. Poor old Richard. Done, boy. He's done. He has an aneurysm. It may burst at any moment."

I tried, as best I might, but ineptly enough, to comfort the dear old man, and we managed to get through the night together. It was the Friday before my café tea with Joan and Peter, of which I have told you, and when I went into the office on the Sunday evening old Richard Chamberlain was finished indeed. He had died that afternoon.

The pain of John Merry's grief I will not recall, nor will I try to tell of the days that followed, when we sat

and worked, he and I, expecting every moment that the door would open and the heavily-shod form of his friend would cross the floor to his usual chair at the center desk. It eased the old man's sense of loss to talk to me, I think, and many were the stories he told me in the next few weeks of Dick Chamberlain's endearing idiosyncrasies.

But I remember best, as anyone so placed would best remember, that it was for Richard Chamberlain's funeral that I bought my first silk hat, and peopled the windows of Prosperity Street with faces by wearing it as I walked to the nearest cab rank, there to crown my somber magnificence by ordering a four-wheeler to take me to the old church where he was to be buried.

§ 3

Youth is callous with no ill intention. Outside the office and away from the presence of John Merry I was mainly conscious of Richard Chamberlain's death not as loss but as an opportunity. It was so that I frankly talked of it with Joan, when she and I were not listening to Ma Gallus on the dual theme of the treachery of bronchitis and the vanity of human wishes, as exemplified in her own life, or bearing meekly Pa's delivery of a variety of funeral orations from the classics of the Elizabethan stage. Our ménage in Prosperity Street was nothing if not sympathetic, taking its tone from the dominating affliction or triumph of any one of its members.

The first of that year's fogs had come down heavily over the town as Joan and I sat, some days later, over a fire in the little sitting-room.

"He has said nothing as yet," I told her, "but it must mean more money. I can't think that he'll appoint anyone in Chamberlain's place. What'll he have to gain? I think he'll probably get someone young to take over my nominal work and let me do what Chamberlain has been supposed to be doing. We might be able to marry on it, Jimbo."

She looked at me with troubled and speculative eyes,

her forehead wrinkled with something dangerously like anxiety, but the corners of her mouth smiling in a contradiction which I found wholly adorable, for all that it made me feel foolishly young in contrast with her quiet wisdom.

"Are you so desperately anxious to marry?" she asked, her tone rallying my boyish fervor for holy matrimony, but her expression, tender as it was, seeming somehow to belie the raillery of her voice.

I explained, at length, just how anxious I was, not to marry, but to marry her.

"You're a funny boy, Frank. Most young men, you know, are only too anxious to be free."

"Most young men haven't the chance of tying themselves up to you," I countered, gallantly but with a feeling that phrase and compliment were cheap before the reality of my devotion.

"But seriously . . ." she began, and paused.

"Yes? Seriously—what?"

"I don't think, I don't honestly think, you ought to marry just yet, even if there is enough money. You see, the paper isn't very certain, and you ought to be perfectly free to move, if you have to move. It isn't as if you were just the ordinary stick-in-the-mud kind of person. You are a terrible ambitionist, for all your niceness. A wife would be an awful nuisance to you."

A sudden doubt of her hammered at my heart.

"Don't you want to marry me, Jimbo?"

"You know I do. If I were only selfish, I'd jump at you this minute, money or no money. It's you I'm thinking about, boy. *I'd* be happy if we had to live all our lives in a pair of rooms, here, in this very house. But I don't want to hinder and hamper you. You are too big a man to be tripped up at the start."

I positively glowed under the implied tribute. Not for a moment did I question my own greatness. I had in fact, as I hastened to explain, an even more gratifying estimate

of my own stature, for I believed that nothing on earth could trip up at the start such a man of destiny as I felt myself to be. Joan listened patiently—I thought then it was worshipingly, but I think now that it was patience and affection which inspired her calm tolerance of my braggings and boastings. When I had finished my gascon diatribe, she sat for a long moment gazing into the fire before she spoke again. After all, she had, perhaps, only been putting me to the test, I told myself. Being no coquette she must have some means of making real the control of me which I so often told her she exercised. That, no doubt, was at the back of her strangely discouraging reluctance to contemplate as immediate a marriage as economic circumstances would permit. Feeling this, my reception of her next remark was richly tolerant, and even unctuously affable.

"Supposing," she said, "supposing that I were a detrimental of some kind. . . ."

"A detrimental?" I questioned.

"Yes. Supposing that instead of being merely an inconvenient young wife, I were a positive liability on your future. Supposing that I were a woman with a past. . . ."

She looked such an incarnation of honest girlhood as she sat there that I chuckled.

"If you were a drunken leper, I'd still be head over heels in love with you, Joan."

"I know you would now. But would you always be? When you found that my evil reputation was holding you back, dragging you down, would you stay in love with me."

"But what utter nonsense. As if . . ."

"It is utter nonsense, isn't it?" she said, turning her eyes from their intent gaze into the red coals to look at me with a gaze no less intent. I leaned forward from my own chair and carried her hands to my lips, in an agony of reverence for her sweet beauty. There were moods when she was a laughing comrade, moods when she was

an understanding friend, moods when she was a lovely and wholly desirable girl, but now she was a slim, young goddess, not to be questioned, not to be doubted. She drew one of her hands gently from my clasp and caressed the bent head that I bowed before her.

"Poor old Dogsboddy!" she said.

The preposterous nickname broke the spell. We became two normal young people again. I was harassed by the conviction, deep in my mind, that there was misunderstanding between us, that we were not, as I longed to think, perfectly at one. I searched my memory to find some occasion of affront by which I might have cooled Joan's love for me. I rehearsed the personalities of possible rivals. I decided that I would "have it out" with her—but not now, when she was so happily ministering to my vanity and my hunger for her kisses. To-morrow, perhaps, or the next day. . . .

Agatha, who came in to lay the tea table, found us placidly talking, like staid old acquaintances. Her soft, adoring eyes rested first upon Joan and then upon me. There was a little envy in the adoration, envy that in a mind less nurtured to humility, would have flamed, I guessed, to raging jealousy, but of which of us I could not hazard. She struck a match and lighted the old-fashioned wheezy gas-burners. As the inadequate yellow light flooded the room I smiled across at Joan, whose eyes met my own with affection enough to lull all my vague uneasiness. And yet—and yet—I could not rid myself of the feeling that, as Agatha's adoration was informed by quiet envy, so Joan's affection was leavened by pity. But why *I* was to be pitied—I, the all conquering, the many times blessed by fortune, the King-who-was-to-be—I could not imagine.

There was a turning of a lock in the hall, and the brave, but uncertain, voice of Pa Gallus informed the household that he was sent from Oberon to view the night sports here, to view the night sports heeeeeerrrrre, the night

sports heeerrrrre. His breath giving out, he reascended the scale to inform the wife of his bosom, in normal prose, that it was a nipping and an eager air. Ma Gallus, we judged, had mounted the stairs from the basement to greet her homing spouse. Her rich, jolly voice reached us in its turn.

"There's patty cakes," she said, as one who announced the Second Advent.

My touch of melancholy vanished. I turned to Joan again, and repeated the information.

"There's patty cakes," I told her.

The friendly clatter of tea-time crockery shamed my futile and inept introspection. All was so obviously for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

CHAPTER EIGHT

§ I

I HAVE tried to convey to you something of the simplicity of outlook which a boy of twenty-two had on his world. The time was to come, as you shall learn, when I began to see those about me in no elementary colors, and to realize that relationships vary, by exquisite gradations of affection or distrust, almost from moment to moment. But when I played at life with the enthusiasm and ignorance of a novice no fine shades fretted my vision of my circumscribed world.

Had I been tutored by time or temperament into a knowledge of the incalculable deeps to be plumbed below even the stillest waters of friendship, I might have been aware of the jeopardy in which my boyish plans of the future were standing. I was blissfully unaware of it, and so safe did I feel in my attachment to Joan that I began, as youth will, to allow her influence upon me to fade from the composing point of my picture, and to become part of

the background against which I was to limn the heroic figure of the triumphant elder self upon whom I so frequently and fatuously brooded.

There was some excuse for me, for events quickened without any stimulus from my restless ambition. Looking back, now, I see that the turning point of my career presented itself, not as I long afterwards liked to fancy, as the result of my own astuteness, but as an accident of which I was led to take immediate advantage, with effects unguessed arising from a cause misjudged.

There was, you must know, a certain amateurishness about the profession of journalism in those far-off days. The men I meet to-day who control great newspaper enterprises are not so much the successors of the men I knew as a new race which by conquest has ousted the older breed. The *Headley Chronicle* and its more prosperous rival the *Lodeshire News* were a boy's playthings compared with the efficient sheets which have long since crushed them both into one organization, still gallantly competing in the name of local patriotism with the national trusts which have grown so ineradicably into our social system. The *Chronicle* was primarily a propaganda sheet for the party which I have chosen to call "the Light Blues." The *News* was primarily a propaganda sheet for that other historic body "the heavy Buffs." If either made profit it was almost incidental. True, there was a business side to the concern, but it comprised a mere handful of men, each of them of doubtful efficiency and all of them inspired by nothing but the desire to retain a means of livelihood sufficient to ensure the continued possession, for pride's sake, of a villa residence and a respectable social status. These, with some bitterness, called those attached to the editorial staff "the clever side." We called them nothing, for we affected to be unaware of their existence. To-day, the two papers together support small armies of employees on both sides of the organization. Then, our total forces could have clinked glasses in

one tap-room, save, of course, for the technical personnel, upon whom business and editorial staffs alike looked with a fine, manly scorn, not foreseeing the day when trade unionism would make them our peers, a kind of third estate in the profession with more actual power to control the material reward than either of the other two.

But there was one member of our business staff who stood out in my imagination. He forced himself upon my attention soon after I joined the paper. That day John Merry and Richard Chamberlain had gone out together for a meal, and I was alone in the room cutting some proofs to fit a page which was bespattered on my plan with advertisements. There was a sharp knock at the door. Absorbed in my work I called "come in," but did not raise my eyes for a moment. When I looked up, my visitor was standing just inside the door surveying me, I thought, a little dubiously.

He was a tall, lanky person of about my own age, dressed in a hideous suit of a loud check pattern, and "sporting"—as he would have said—a violent tie trans-fixed by a horse-shoe pin which Mr. Benjamin Winterbottom, our neighbor, might have envied. As he stood there his attitude seemed so consciously "knowing" that I was moved to a momentary antagonism, which combined a fierce dislike of his attire with as fierce a dislike of its wearer. But the feeling lasted only until I looked squarely into his eyes, when it changed completely. Despite the choice of garb, the attitude of self-complacency, if not of aggressive conceit, and despite a heavy flaxen mustache of the most objectionable waxed variety, I liked the fellow. His eyes, alert, honest, humorous and trustworthy, conquered me.

"Well?" I said.

"Is the old man about?" he asked, in a voice the rich baritone of which was marred by a northern burr.

"Mr. Merry? No. He's out. Anything I can do?"

"Are you the new assistant?"

"Yes."

He came into the room, his dubious look changing into a regard of some pleasure.

"Jew review that book of essays las' We'nsdee?" he asked.

"Which particular book of essays?" I asked in my turn.

"Rounds's."

"Oh, you mean *Prose Fancies* by Raymond Rounds. Yes, I reviewed that."

He came still nearer to where I stood by the table, and seizing my unwilling hand he wrung it in a fervor of appreciation for my critical taste, or my literary style, I was not sure which. This done, he stood back two paces and regarded me with positive affection.

"Jew ever read Emerson?" he then asked, with considerable anxiety.

I admitted that I had read all of Emerson.

"Read the essay on 'Self-reliance' by Emerson?"

Many times, I admitted.

"Carlyle?"

Carlyle had not escaped me, I had to confess. He stepped back the two paces and took my hand again.

"Know who I am?" he asked.

I was ignorant as to his identity, I conveyed with dignity.

"Me!" he pointed a proud index finger at his very ample chest. "Me! I'm the 'ero as business man. It's right. 'Ero as business man. Carlyle forgot 'im, didn't he?"

At my look of bewilderment he burst into laughter.

"'Sarl right, reely," he assured me. "'Sonly my joke. I'm the deputy advertisements manager, reely. Not that it's much to boast about. They have a new one every few months. I've only been 'im for six weeks. But I *am* 'im."

His mode of speech baffled me a little. It was half illiterate. His aspirates sometimes did their duty and sometimes were absent from parade. His tone lacked all sem-

blance of culture, but he read Emerson and Carlyle and appreciated my precious reviews. It occurred to me that he was in some early transition stage between the crudities of the board school and the self-obtained polish of the well-read bourgeois. I found again, to my amazement, that I liked him.

He took Mr. Merry's chair with no sense of sacrilege.

"Come up with a change of plan for page four," he said.

"Oh, I'm working on it now. What's changed?"

For a few minutes we were busied with our technical interchange. The business finished, he became again the friendly interloper.

"I say. Could you len' me that book of essays?" he asked with just a faint hint in his voice that he expected a rebuff. Before I could reply he added eagerly that he would keep it clean and return it promptly.

"Of course I'll lend it to you," I said, and took it from the drawer wherein it reposed. Another volume caught my eye. "What about this?" I said holding it out to him. He took it wonderingly.

"*The Martyrdom of Man*," he said reflectively. "Shall I like it?"

There was a surprisingly ingenuous inflection in his voice now.

"You ought to," I told him.

He thrust a book into each pocket.

"I'll try it," he said with decision. "Say, jew read a lot?"

I explained that books were my life to a large extent, both privately and professionally.

"I read a lot, too," he informed me. "Some say it's a waste of time. I don't think so. Getting men's minds on the cheap, I call it. By the way, my name's George Lawton."

I responded by telling him mine. He had risen now from the editorial chair that he had so casually occupied.

"Well, good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye."

"I'll keep 'em clean and return 'em safely."

"That's all right. Any time you want something to read, let me know."

"Jew mean that?"

"Why, of course I mean it."

"Right. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

He had reached the door when he turned again and came back to me.

"I say," he said, "you wouldn't think I was a sentimental fellow, would you?"

Looking into the full glare of his appalling suit and tie and his wonderful mustache there was only one answer possible to me.

"No, I wouldn't," I assured him.

"Well, I am. Been here six weeks, and you're the only fellow on this side of the office that's treated me like a gentleman. Doesn't matter, reely, but there it is. Shan't forget, see? Don't want to talk about it, but thought you ought to know, see?"

I saw—and I saw, too, that he was painfully embarrassed. This time it was I who took *his* hand.

"That's all right," I told him, and without another word we parted.

It must have been five minutes afterwards that the door opened again and his head was thrust in.

"Say, Mr. Peyton?"

"Yes?"

"George, to you, see?"

"All right, George," I said, laughingly.

He positively beamed at me.

"That's the style," he said, and was gone, this time for good.

§ 2

After that introduction, he became a frequent visitor. He waited, I fancy, until he knew that Merry and Chamberlain were out of the way if he came in the evening, but often when I had gone down in the afternoon for some purpose, he would come in, having, by some occult process of his own, sensed my presence in the building. We had long talks chiefly about books, but sometimes about life. One of these, about a week or two before Richard Chamberlain's death, stays in my memory.

"What I want ter do," said George very confidentially, after a glance round the empty room to assure himself that we were really alone, "is to bring off a coop."

"A coop?" I said.

"Yes, a coop. Yew know. Like the coop dee tat in Paris."

"Oh, the *coup d'état*." Heaven knows I had not meant to display my superior grammar school French, nor did he take my pronunciation as a correction.

"Ah! That's what you call it. I thought it couldn't be said as it's written. 'Tisn't in my *All that a Tourist needs in France*. Well, what I want is ter bring off a coo."

"What kind of a coup?"

"Financial. It isn't any use thinkin' that the ordinary fella can save money or earn money enough to call money. If you want money, you 'ave to make money, see?"

I thought I saw.

"Now, if I could bring off a coo—and I *shall* bring one off, one of these days—I could find myself, if you follow me?"

I nodded. I had in my ears Agatha's quiet voice, "wanting to feel real." But Agatha had been bred in an Institution. I was curious to discover how this blatant cavalier was even now prevented from finding himself. I hardly liked to put him to the question, but with his quick intuition he guessed my thought.

"You know, this isn't me," he said, with an index finger at his chest that was this time not proud but deprecatory. "You don't *think* I *like* being seen about like a walking chess-board, do you? No. A fella that's after orders for advertisements has got to make himself stand out, as you might say—so that people'll remember him. But if I could bring off a coo, that wouldn't be necessary, see? I'd clip off my sergeant-major's mustache, and wear nice tony browns and greys and be a human bein' instead of a perambulating one-man-band. You're all right, Mr. Peyton, you are. You've got a quiet job, an' a bit of education to back you. You've got what I call tase. Good tase—that's what you've got. I 'aven't got it yet. But I'm going to 'ave. The 'ero as business man! See?"

Yet again I saw.

"Jever read Ruskin? I often read Ruskin. I don't always 'old with him. He's a bit of a crank most times. But in the main, he's right. I mean, underneath all that 'Unto This Last' nonsense, he's right. Tase—that's what he stands for. Good tase. Carlyle and Emerson—force. Ruskin—tase. Blend 'em, and what jew get? The 'ero as business man."

"What kind of a coup do you fancy?" I said.

"Dunno. Can't say 'til it comes along. It'll come. And when it does come, Mr. Peyton, you're to be in it, see? Bess fren I ever had. Don't want to sound sloppy, but it's right. When the coo comes off, you're in it."

"All right, George," I said, good-humoredly, not anticipating the day when I should be held to the bond.

§ 3

That day came sooner than, I imagine, even the sanguine George himself expected. A few weeks after the death of Richard Chamberlain I was busy in my bedroom in Prosperity Street writing what, I did not doubt, was to be the second of my masterpieces. The first of them was already being rejected by the publishers, who showed a

surprising unanimity as to its lack of merits. I had recently bought a new oil stove, which warmed the room adequately but impregnated everything I possessed with an odor of paraffin, and which on this particular afternoon was smoking most vilely.

Agatha's timid knock sounded on the panels of my door.

"Come in," I commanded, regally.

She came in, and announced that a Mr. Lawton was waiting below to see me.

"Is there a fire in the sitting-room?"

There was no fire.

"Then show him up here, will you?"

In a few moments George was framed in my doorway. He was wrapped in a huge overcoat of some very woolly tweed and of a pattern which put my bedroom wallpaper itself to shame. Agatha, beside him, seemed more than ever a gray waif.

"Hello. Come in!" I said, wondering what quest brought him hither from his usual frenzied hunt for advertisers.

He waited until Agatha had closed the door on him and then advanced conspirator-like to the center of the room, from where he skilfully flung his hat over the bust of Goethe on the mantelshelf. This done he took out from an inner pocket a crumpled paper packet of cheap cigarettes, offered one to me and lighted one for himself. He was seated on the edge of my bed happily inhaling the smoke before he vouchsafed a word.

"Got some news, Mr. Peyton," he said.

"Oh. Good—or bad?"

"Tall depends. Tall depends on what we make of it. The old man is going to sell the paper."

I rose hurriedly from my chair at this.

"What!" I challenged him.

"The old man's going to sell the paper," he repeated, obviously enjoying the effect of his announcement.

"How do you know?"

"I do know."

"I simply don't believe it, George. Mr. Merry would have said something to me if . . ."

"Mr. Merry doesn't know himself, yet. But he'll sell, see if he don't."

"But where did you pick this up?" If Merry sold the paper, my day-dream castles might come tumbling about my ears. To say that I was agitated is to express very mildly the perturbation which stirred me.

"It's like this, see? Mr. Merry he's had a man with him twice this week, I know. I seen him go in and come out. Well, to-day the fellow came to me in the front office and began to ask questions."

"What sort of questions?"

"Oh, just general questions. 'Bout the state of trade and that kind of thing."

"But, look here, that doesn't mean anything. He may be after a job. . . ."

"But I know him."

"You know him?"

"Yes. The first time I saw him I thought 'know that man's face.' The next time I was sure I'd seen him sometime, somewhere. So I sat down and thought, and thought, and thought, see? Then I remembered him."

He dived a hand into the capacious pocket of his overcoat and drew forth a dog's-eared and tattered copy of a popular periodical. This he opened carefully, folded equally carefully until only an illustration showed, and passed to me. I saw the plump, clean shaven face of a man in his early thirties, looking very Napoleonic and purposeful.

"Know him?" asked my visitor.

"I seem to, but I can't place him." I unfolded the page and glanced at the article which the portrait adorned. It was headed "What the Public Reads—By One Who Supplies It" and the name of the author was Arthur Hills-

dun. I remembered perfectly now who was this dominating young man. I whistled cheerlessly.

"Ay! You may well whistle, if the Hillsdun brothers are after the old *Chronicle*. I've been expecting this, Mr. Peyton."

"Expecting it?"

"Yes. If I was rich it's the kind of coo I'd be on to, see? Buying up papers all here and there and supplying stereo from Lunnon and cutting costs down. It's the game. But we can't let 'em have the old *Chronicle*."

"But what can we do?"

George seemed visibly to expand at my question. He sat there on the rickety 'bed in that little bedroom, a rather "loud" young man in the cheapest of attire, but his aura, as the psychists would say, was vibrating with self-conscious greatness. He dominated the room as if he were some heathen god to whom the smoky oil stove was sending up incense.

"Do? Do? We can stop 'em. Listen to me. Old Merry is fond of you, an' he's a good-hearted old boy. He'll probably tell you that he intends to sell out. If he does, you must ask him for an option."

"A what?" I had given no thought to the intricacies of finance at that time of my life. One could take and exercise options on scrip, I knew, but I hardly knew how one could do the same on a newspaper.

"An option. You say to him, see, that he mustn't sell for a week, at the end of which time you'll offer him as good a price as anybody else, see?"

Lawton was frankly excited now. He leaned forward and tapped my thigh with his finger as I stood over him, partly to emphasize his points and partly for the sake of translating his emotion into explanatory action.

"But, my dear George, he won't do it, and if he did, we haven't any money."

"We can get it."

"What!"

"We can get it."

"Do you realize what the paper's worth?"

There was another dive into the big pocket, and this time a notebook emerged. It was opened and a page found.

"Here you are. Original capital, twenty-five thousand pounds. Improvements, say ten thousand pounds. Depreciations, say eight thousand pounds. Conservative valuation of standing assets to-day, apart from good-will, say twenty thousand pounds, including lease. Good-will—nothing, for the circulation's going down and the revenue is going down. Worth in the open market, say the original twenty-five thousand. Offer old Merry thirty and he'll jump at it; why—coz he never expected to get his money back, see?"

"But——"

"Wait. Listen to me. Say he'll part to young Hillsdun or to us for twenty-five thousand, we want to raise thirty. Don't interrupt me, I'll tell you why in a minute." He had definitely taken command of me now. "Thirty thousand pounds in a week. We have nothing. That's the start, see? But if you persuade old Merry to give you this option we've got a property worth twenty-five thousand, see?"

"We haven't. Merry has."

"*We* have. What we do nex' is to get a syndicate together. I'll nobble old Fripps, the iron man, and Bill Markham, of Markham's stores. They don't know what they're worth, those two fellows. You've got to get the ole Dook of Wexminster."

"What!"

"Don't interrupt me. I say, you've got to get the ole Dook of Wexminster. He's the head of the party, see?"

"But . . ."

"That's free of them at ten thousand each, see? What we do is to get the syndicate document properly drawn up by a lawyer—I know a cheap un—and there we are."

"But——"

"I know what you're going to say—where do we come in? That's where I shine. The 'ero as business man, see? What we do is to float a company for acquiring the paper from old man Merry. That's us. You an' me. Then we float a company for acquiring the paper from us. Say old Merry'll sell for twenty-five thousand cash, we sell for thirty in cash and two founders' shares."

"I don't follow, George . . ."

"Simple as A.B.C. I'll tell you again. You go to Merry and get the option for a week."

"But why should he give it to me?"

"Ah, that's where you come the local and party game, see. I've got to trust you for that. Tell him you can't bear to see a local property go to Lunnon controllers and that it isn't fair to the party to let the organ slip out of its grasp, see. So you get the option. That'll mean you 'ave to pay old Merry twenty-five thousand quidlets. See?"

I saw that clearly enough.

"Right. Then we go to Fripps and Bill Markham and the old Dook and say to 'em, 'Now, here's a nice property worth any amount of money in the right hands, and going for thirty thousand. You come in at ten thousand apiece and it's ours.' And they'll say, 'But what do you want as vendors?' And we say, 'Well, we want two governing shares, and the two jobs of editing and managing the show, us being experts, see?' They say, 'What the 'ell do you mean by two governing shares?' And we say, 'Well, this property is so promising that we'll have to go to the public, sooner or later, for more capital, but we don't want the or'nery shareholders to take the control off us, do we? No. So we draw up articles of association putting the control into the hands of founders, on founders shares, and we want two of 'em for our trouble?'"

"But, George, will they possibly do it? Won't they see through the swindle?"

"Swindle? Wot swindle? It's no swindle. You an' me

between us can make that old rag pay ten, fifteen, ay, an' even twenty per cent on thirty thousand within ten years, wiv our modern idears."

"I believe we could," I said, the dream of a paper of my own to run taking hold of me.

"Then you'll stand in. I can't do it without you, you see, coz nobody else can persuade the old man into holding hard and giving us an option."

"But won't he want money for the option?"

"Not from you he won't. That's where the sentimental pull comes in, see?"

"I suppose the scheme is all right?"

"If you can get that option, it's copper-bottomed."

"I didn't mean that way. I meant morally all right."

"It's business, that's what it is. Nothing more nor less than business. Straight, honest business. Everybody left happy and better off, excep' that pushing devil Hillsdun, an' what right has he to come engineering his private coos with our property?"

The commercial genius, you see, was already thinking of it as our property. I still had some lingering doubts, but I was, under Lawton's enthusiasm, in no mood to display them. When he went, after again schooling me into the part I was to play with John Merry, I was more than half persuaded that two penniless persons could, indeed, by skilful manipulation acquire the virtual control of an established newspaper and a joint bank balance of five thousand pounds—five thousand pounds that in those days seemed wealth beyond the dreams of even the most plutocratic avarice. It is odd to think, looking back, that I said no word of George and his preposterous scheme either to Joan or Peter.

§ 4

I was well-prepared, as you see, for John Merry's revelation which came that same evening. The dear old boy was obviously uncomfortable during the early part

of the evening. At eight o'clock he rose from his chair, stroked his long beard, polished and replaced his monocle, and with some attempt at jocularly said, "Will my editorial staff honor me by its company at dinner?" His editorial staff said it would, and donned its hat.

As on the first evening of our association we had the dining-room of the County Club to ourselves. My chief stood balancing himself on his heels before the fire, his hands deep in the fob pockets of his wide trousers. I noticed that he had palpably aged since I had seen him stand so that other night, now of so many crowded months ago. There were pouches under his eyes and behind the irremovable glass his gaze seemed less alert.

The girl brought the usual bowls of soup with which the club meal began and we sat down to eat. For a while the old man talked of commonplace things, of his hunting and his card-playing, of politics and local affairs. Then, with difficulty, came the topic for which I waited.

"Peyton, I suppose you've become attached to the *Chronicle* since you joined us?"

"Very much so, sir."

"You've been a very good servant of the paper."

"I'd like to think so."

"No doubt of it. If we'd had you twenty years ago things might have been different."

"If you'd had me twenty years ago, sir, you would have had to provide a rattle to keep me quiet."

"Gad, yes. I suppose so. One doesn't always realize . . ."

Still he could not break to me his news. After a pause he said,

"Peyton—I suppose you'd be willing to serve under another editor?"

I replied like the hypocrite that I felt myself to be,

"You're not thinking of . . ."

He interrupted me.

"I'm thinking of selling my interest."

"But . . ."

He was not listening to me. He was justifying himself to himself.

"You see, I'm not as young as I was, and it's hardly the same since old Dick went. It's true that I've no family, but I've nieces and nephews. They'll none of them want to be saddled with a decaying local newspaper. It isn't as if . . . of course one will see that the interests of the staff are protected. . . ."

"Look here, Sir," I said, breaking in on his monologue, "are you determined to sell?"

"Practically, Peyton. But you'll be all right, my boy. I'll see to that."

"I wasn't worrying about that, Mr. Merry. What I was worrying about was . . ."

And I launched into my part as instructed by the ebullient George. I think the dear old boy was rather amazed at my fervor for the local traditions and the local party, but when I came to the point he admitted that if he could find a purchaser locally to equal the bid of the London offer he would prefer such an one.

"I suppose," I began tentatively, "you wouldn't give me an option for a week?"

"You, Peyton?"

"Oh, I don't mean that I have the money, but . . ."

"I don't want the property hawked about. That would be damnable."

I assured him that nothing was further from my mind.

"Can't you put your cards on the table, boy?"

It was quite kindly in tone.

"No, Sir. I can't. But I think if you would give me a week I could find a backer who might come in for the sake of the party. . . ."

"You're still incurably ingenuous, Peyton. The party is a broken reed. It'll neither come in nor do anything else, but howl when it isn't reported verbatim."

"I know it's awful cheek, Sir, but would you do it?"

"Do you know what my figure would be?"

"I don't, but I could hazard a round guess. I should say twenty-five thousand."

"What makes you think that?"

I brought out the figures that George had supplied from his notebook as if my own lightning brain had conceived their collation.

"The reasoning's sound. Look here, Peyton, I'll tell you what I'll do. I won't sell before a week hence, and if you can find a purchaser at twenty-five, you can have the property. But, mark you, on honor not to go touting about. . . ."

"I shall speak of it to no more than three at most. If I can't do it then, I'll drop it."

I think the affection for me of which George had spoken was very real, for the eyes looking into my own softened unaccountably.

"I'd give you the damn property, Peyton, if I had only myself to think about. . . ."

He wouldn't, but he thought he would, and I almost thought so too as I thanked him.

George next morning received my news with quiet satisfaction. I had met him by appointment in the middle of the morning in the back room of a hostel he frequented—it was before the days of mid-morning coffee, when we still took our liquor as the natural refresher for that time of the day.

"Ah, I counted on that. I've done my whack. I've got both Fripps and Markham. . . ."

"Already?"

"Oh, I've been playing 'em for months, in the hope of a coo turning up. I got 'em by telling each of 'em that the other was coming in. I said, 'Nothing the first year, darn little the next, and then a steady fifteen and a property worth three times the purchase price.' That fetched 'em. Now, we've got to see the Dook."

"I'll try and get hold of him some time this week."

"Not you. I'm coming with you and we're seeing him to-morrow."

"But . . ."

"Look here."

He handed to me an envelope on the back of which was his pencil copy of a telegram sent that morning and an actual telegram which was the reply. The first read: "Can you see self and colleague on important business to-morrow, Peyton, Headley Chronicle, reply paid." The second was terse but stimulating: "Happy see you three Wexminster."

"But how did you know that I'd get the option?"

"I risked it."

"If I hadn't got it. . . ."

He smiled at me indulgently.

"We'd still have seen him to ask him to bring pressure to bear on the old man, see?"

"But is it necessary for us both to see him?"

"Can't trust you, Peyton. You're too gentle for handlin' dooks. Mus' go now. Got to borrow a trap to get us to Wexminster Towers to-morrow. You done a good stroke of work las' night. So long."

He was gone, leaving me with a half finished glass of mild ale and a host of reflections. I shrank from the thought of facing the stately old Duke with such a companion. I had met the Duke only twice or thrice at political meetings, and had found him gracious, but I expected a very adverse reaction from George's blatant manner. I regretted that I had ever been dragged into the hare-brained scheme. But my regrets were swamped by an inrush of day-dreams. A full-blown editor at twenty-three and a half, and a part proprietor! It would be a miraculous achievement and a still more miraculous starting point. Certainly no scruples about ruffling the equanimity of a duke or two could be allowed to stand in the way, but I still feared a fiasco sufficiently to keep silence about our marvelous project. Joan grumbled at

tea time that I was grumpy and distrait, but I lied gallantly and said that it was because she could not walk down to the office with me.

The clock was striking two, the following afternoon, when I took up my post at the Orphanage gates, there to await George and his borrowed trap. Wexminster Towers, the Duke's Lodeshire place, was a good three-quarters of an hour away behind a fast stepper. I had dressed myself with elaborate care, striving to convey by my exterior that I was a statesman whose youthful appearance belied his ripe wisdom. My satisfaction was not complete, for the complacency with which I doted upon my own appearance was broken by the anticipative horror with which I recoiled from the appearance of my companion on this delicate adventure. In my imagination I saw him confronting the ducal good taste in a suit of horrid checks and perkily twisting the abhorrent ends of his repellent mustache. For myself, I had grown accustomed to his chromatic clothes, but the old Duke would, no doubt, mistake him for the grocer's young man, and have us dismissed with ignominy from his gates.

I was drawn from my mournful reverie by the sound of an approaching horse. I looked up to see a smart Raleigh car pulled by a beautiful bay and driven by a youthful middle-aged man in a long driving coat of the latest fashion. I was traitorous enough to contrast wistfully this pleasant equipage and this quietly impressive driver with the crude vehicle, and the loud occupant, which I awaited.

The horse was skilfully reined in, and the trap came to a halt at my shoulder. The driver, holding his long carriage-whip erect at his right shoulder, smiled down on me with happy recognition. There was something bafflingly familiar about the rosy cheeks, but the shadow of the hard felt hat hid the eyes somewhat, and the strong mouth, which was revealed rather than hidden by the close-cropped military mustache, was as unfamiliar to

me as the strong chin above the precise and almost somber neckwear.

"Jump up," said George's voice, "we don't want to keep His Grace waiting for us."

I cried his name.

"'Sme, a'right," he replied, "'an' at one touch of the fairy's wand the ole beast was transformed into a beootiful Prince. . . 'Ow do we look?"

"Splendid!" I declared, and clambered up to the seat beside him. He clicked his tongue in an expert way, and the horse responding began to carry us towards the Towers.

George was too busy piloting our conveyance through a sudden block of rural traffic to say the appropriate thing that I am sure trembled on his lips, but I heard a spectral Pa Gallus at my shoulder telling me that the die was cast and all was on the hazard.

C H A P T E R N I N E

§ I

IF THERE WERE but worlds enough and time, I would tell you in great detail of our interview with the old Duke of Wexminster. You must, in default, imagine our progress. George filled the drive by a graphic account of how, having borrowed the horse and trap, he had taken himself to a theatrical costumier of his acquaintance and had himself "perdooced" as Mr. Cecil Rhodes.

At my ejaculation he explained fully the remarkable procedure.

"'S'right. I went to old Verney an' tole him that I was doing Cecil Rhodes in some tableaux-vivants. Verney played up. 'You'll have to crop that safety-curtain of yours,' he said, 'and the rest'll be easy.' So we got a photograph out of the paper and chose the clothes accord-

ingly. An' here I am. Shouldn't be surprised if the old Dook takes me for Rhodes in person."

The old Duke was not so easily misled, but his servants did us every honor, and His Grace was more than tolerant. Whether it was my enthusiasm, or the convincing interpolations of George, who disciplined himself and only spoke when he feared I was not being thoroughly convincing, or whether the far-sighted statesman realized that we were the handiest agents to secure for him the continued control of a useful local organ, I do not know, but I do know that before the end of the afternoon his assent had completed our syndicate. I think it was the name of Arthur Hillsdun which was our word of power.

"We certainly don't want those lads here, Peyton," he said. "They'd tag themselves on to the local party and play Hamlet with it. It would be the music-hall mind at its worst. Enterprise is all very well, young fellow, but you're quite right, we don't want that sort of enterprise."

I came to know the Duke of Wexminster very much more intimately as the years passed, and I see, now, that he regarded the Hillsduns and their like much as he regarded his grooms, as excellent people in their places, people with whom he shared some of his tastes and with whom he was prepared to be friendly, but people of no background and slight tradition, who would alter society far too quickly without themselves realizing the implications of the changes they innovated.

He didn't question my editorial ability, but he gave George a few minutes' cross-examination, from which my fellow man-of-destiny creditably emerged.

"You've a good deal to learn on the financial side," said the Duke, "but you seem the sort of fella who'll do it."

"Then you'll come in, Sir?" I asked.

He nodded.

"On condition," he said.

I waited, while he surveyed me thoughtfully from

under brows which rivaled those of old John Merry for shagginess.

"On condition that any founder relinquishing his governing share is tied by articles to offer it to the Chairman of the local organization."

I looked at George, who nodded his acquiescence.

"That will be all right, Sir," I assured our host, caring little about the matter. "And you'll be Chairman of the new company?"

"That will mean that you'll have me at your back on matters of policy . . .? Yes. Perhaps, I'd better. You're a bit young, Peyton, you know. But you seem wise enough. You'd better let my lawyers draw up your documents. I'll instruct them for you. . . ."

We returned to the discussion of technical matters, which occupied us until a decanter of sherry was brought in to end the interview.

"Well!" said the Duke, as we picked up our glasses and wondered what was ducal etiquette on such occasions. He paused to remark that this was the authentic "Bristol Cream" and to assure us that there was nothing like it.

"Well!" he said again, "I give you the paper."

He meant it as a toast, but his words were literally true. I cannot remember how we took ourselves away. My recollection is that we were drinking sherry one moment and the next were bowling down the drive in our borrowed trap. Not until we were out of sight of the lodge did we exchange a word. Then George reined in the horse.

"Peyton," he said, dropping the "Mr." for the first time in our association.

"Yes, George?" I answered, coming out of my own magnificent day-dream.

"We're made."

And with no further comment he whipped up the borrowed animal. Even when we parted nothing more was

said, but he leaned down to where I stood on the pavement and gripped my hand with an emotion obviously too deep for words. I almost feared he would descend to embrace me. I watched him drive away, every line of his erect figure bespeaking confidence and determination. Then I walked slowly towards Prosperity Street to tell Joan how abruptly we had come into the forecourts of our kingdom.

§ 2

As I turned the corner by the Penny Bank and saw the familiar vista of little houses, rising where the flat street began at its mid-point to ascend towards the cross line of but slightly better dwellings, I realized abruptly that George's coup meant that my tenure of a single bedroom, with use of sitting-room and board in the ménage of Pa Gallus, was about to end. Quite obviously the new editor of the *Chronicle* must be more fittingly housed. I saw myself decorously garbed leaving each day a somewhat austere villa in a more remote suburb or an old-fashioned house in Victoria Square where, not foreseeing how soon the coming of the motor-car was to impel them further afield from their consulting rooms, the wealthier professional men kept their abodes. Already the richer tradesmen had ceased to live by their shops and warehouses and were driving in each day to the center of the growing town. Well I, too, would shortly be driving in. Would Joan, I wondered, consent to abandon the simple white blouse and green skirt which befitted the art mistress, and don the complicated gown with shoulder-of-mutton sleeves which would be the correct wear for so important a person as the wife of a brilliant young editor? I tried to picture her with her hair dressed in the mode, instead of in its usual easy knot lying at the nape of her proud little neck. There were sunny curls that I would miss. . . . But the time had come to abandon the idyllic for the earnest. If one were to have a career in the great

world, one must say good-bye to Arcady. These things were inevitable. I consciously set my mouth into the firm line which to any acute observer betokened the man of affairs, and straightened my shoulders in a passable imitation of George's imitation of the great South African statesman. I was not quite certain whether I was a new Delane or a new Morley, but I was very certain that I was not the old Francis Gerrard Peyton. Before my latch-key had turned in the lock Joan was receiving the wives of potentates in a dream castle surprisingly like Westminster Towers.

I called her name aloud as I entered the hall, and waited eagerly for the answering salute. Neither from her room above nor from the sitting-room at my left was there any reply. Again I called. There was still no answer. I took off my coat, a little chagrined that chance had balked me of a theatrical return. Mounting the stairs to my own room, the need to tell Joan my news fermenting within me, I called again, but this time for Mrs. Gallus.

"Mrs. Gallus!" I cried, and waited for the wheezy response.

"Mrs. Gallus!"

She, too, it seemed was out, nor did my call for Agatha produce any sign of life in the house. It occurred to me as odd that in the early evening the house should be so deserted. I had a moment of panic. Had some tragedy happened? Was I confronted by an urban equivalent to the mystery of the *Marie Celeste*? Had I dreamt the whole relationship and association which had been my life in this place? The eerie mood passed as suddenly as it had fallen upon me. Of course, there was some simple explanation. Probably Ma Gallus and Agatha had gone marketing, having warned Marion Mary and Pa to procure a meal in town or at the "Singing Sambo." And Joan—Joan was probably even now on her way home. I would wash and change and make some tea for myself before

going down to the office, by which time Joan would be back to hear my great news.

At the door of my room I halted. Joan's door was closed, but there was someone sobbing within, sobbing as a child sobs, with quick intakes of difficult breath that shake the whole body. I stepped from one door to the other and knocked, my own breath taken by a sudden gripping anxiety.

"Joan! Joan! What is it? Can I come in?"

At the sound of my voice the sobs were gathered into an outburst of passionate crying. Without ceremony or thought I opened the door and went in.

I recall it now as a strange example of the way one's mind functions that I did not at first become, as it were, vividly conscious of the girlish figure on the bed, but of the room. I had never crossed its threshold before, often as I had lingered with an elbow to the lintel taking my long good-nights. I entered it now to be engulfed in its own atmosphere, so strangely different from that of my own room at the other side of the wall. I took in, I suppose with instantaneous appreciation, its pristine quality and the savor of the prints which adorned its walls, walls that had been decorated amateurishly by a paper which no professional of those days would have had the instinctive taste to select. It was somehow not like a room in Prosperity Street. One stepped into it out of and away from the prevailing mood of the rest of the narrow old-fashioned house as if into some small sanctuary of gracious and soothing quietude. So I felt it before I turned towards the bed.

At my unceremonious entry the crying girl had composed herself, and when I turned was no longer prostrate. She had raised herself and now sat on the bedside facing me and biting her lip, while the tears still coursed down her cheeks. It was not Joan, but Agatha.

My alarm came back full tide. I stepped over and gripped her arm.

"What is it? What's the matter? What has happened?"

She positively gulped down a rising sob in her pathetic eagerness to answer me.

"She's gone! She's gone!" she said in a tone of utter despair, and then repeated more quietly but no less poignantly, "She's gone!"

I shook her at that, impatiently and with a gust of uncontrollable anger at her inarticulate pathos.

"Who's gone? Gone where?"

They were stupid, rhetorical questions. I knew only too well who had gone, and I guessed into what unrevealed self-banishment.

"Miss Joan. She went this afternoon. In a cab."

To Agatha the cab was as much an event as whatever catastrophe had led to and followed its employment.

"Gone where?"

"I don't know. She left notes."

"Notes!"

At the word I swung round and left the room for my own, to find, as instinct warned me, Joan's message to me. My day had been so unreal that this seemed the crowning unreality. I stood there balancing the bulky envelope in my fingers and feeling like some absurd hero in some third-rate melodrama. There was no use, I told myself, in behaving like a fool, and with the injunction I placed the letter down on my writing-table, struck a match, lighted the crazy gas-jet, and with the utmost deliberation took out a cigarette. It was when I held the second match to the cigarette that I first realized that I was trembling like a palsied man.

Then I sat down and, still with forced deliberation, opened Joan's letter.

§ 3

They are in front of me now as I transcribe them, the yellowing sheets covered by her writing. The first of them looks almost like the first page of any normal, well-dis-

ciplined letter, but the later sheets betray her extreme agitation. The writing sprawls and recovers itself, and the sentences lose their coherency. She must have written it with her mouth set more grimly than I had ever seen it, her proud little chin the prouder from the tensivity of her lips. As I read it my own emotions chased each other like waves of light across a field of corn, cold anger succeeding self-pity, love for Joan following something very like hatred for the resolution in her which had brought her to the writing of so shattering a message. But I read on steadily, although six months earlier I would, I know, have interrupted my reading to indulge in a variety of romantic capers and posturings. What poseurs we are in the twenties! Fresh from my triumph with the Duke of Wexminster I was meeting tragedy like a strong, silent man. And Joan—Joan, whom I had never really known and whom I had allowed to slip into the background of the stage whereon I was disporting myself—Joan, whose great heart had driven her into a sacrifice which my shallow thought could not gauge—was even now, at the moment of her loss, to me only really a convenient occasion for consciously restrained histrionics. So, looking back, I see myself. So I judge myself. But then I sat at my romantic writing table and read steadily the letter she had left for me. It began formally enough:

“My dear Frank,

I don't know whether I am being a heroine or a fool. Whichever I am, I want you to realize that what I am doing is for you. You know how much, how very much, I love you, and how I shrink from even seeming to hurt you. But I have grown frightened these last months. I can't stay and let you marry me, Frank, and I can't face you to tell you why. You wouldn't really understand if I did.

You have never asked me about myself, and I have never told you. If, as I thought, when we first met, things had shaped for us as I hoped they would, I never would

have told you. I thought then, my dear, that you and I would always stay poor together, and that when you came to your fame—as you will come to it—it would be the kind of fame that goes with being poor, and that we would be together somewhere out of the world, you writing and I painting, and neither of us concerned with other people very much. But things aren't shaping that way. I see now that they can't. You've been caught up into a different kind of world. You have been very kind to me, Frank, but lately you've only given me a bit of yourself. I know that all your planning and working has been partly for me, but it has taken you away from me, really. I have watched you so intently, talked of you to Sinbad, and even to George Lawton, and I've thought of you hour after hour, and I know now what is to happen to you. You are going to be more and more a doer of things and less and less an explainer and a watcher. You are going to be a man amongst men, and when I'd lost my first glamor you'd find you'd married the wrong sort of wife. I know you love me, Frank, but love is a tricky thing. It can be killed. Our marriage would kill it. It would end in dissatisfactions and irritations and a sense of betrayal. I know, because I've been thinking it all over while you've been watching your opportunity on the *Chronicle*. And I know for another reason. My mother's marriage went that way. I've never had the pluck to tell you, Frank, but she's in prison, and she's in prison because she and my father muddled things and she killed him at last. It's out now. I'm the daughter of a convicted murderess. She is the Mrs. Agnew of the Agnew case. I was only a kiddie when it happened—not really a kiddie—but in my teens. I was too proud to shed my horrid name and I came here, and have been here ever since. Mrs. Gallus knows and Sinbad—but I couldn't bring myself to tell you until the right moment, and now I know there would never have been a right moment. So I'm going away. Oh, Frank, please don't be hurt or angry with me. If we'd been going to marry and stay hidden away from people, just sending our work out to be judged by itself, it wouldn't have mattered. But I see now, with

your temperament and the way things are taking you, that you'll always be something of a public man, even if it only turns out to be a local public man. So our marriage would be all wrong. Even if I were the right sort of wife for you, you wouldn't want my antecedents spoiling your comfort and your progress. Oh, my dear, I have loved you, and I do love you. I shall always do that. But I can't stay with you. I've tried hard to tell you this bravely, but I've not been able to. So I'm just going. Please don't fret or worry about me, Frank. I shall be all right. I have a little money and I can find new work for myself. And don't try to follow or trace me. I'm sure I'm right. Forgive me, Frank. I'm trying to do what is best. God bless you always, and make you happy. My dear, dear Frank. You'll never know how terribly much I care for you or what it means to end things like this. Think of me always as your loving and heart-broken,

JOAN."

§ 4

It moves me now, that letter, to pity and anger—pity, an infinite, unreasoning pity for her, and a cold anger with myself. It moved me then, equally, to pity and anger, but my anger was with Joan and my pity for myself. I am trying to be honest, you see, and not to hide the truth about these things. It seemed to me, in my boyishly selfish pride, that she had cruelly misjudged me. What did I care that she was the child of the notorious Mrs. Agnew! My own strength would have shouldered the burden. Why did she think that my love and thought for her were less than hers for me! If I had become immersed in what she romantically called a world of men it was only because I was building a fame for her to share. I had only withdrawn myself from her that I might return laden with tributes. I had only been reserved that my eventual revelation might be the more wonderful. And why should she be fearful because I had only given her a part of myself—she who had trusted the ridiculous Mrs. Gallus and Peter with her secret and kept it from me—she who must

have urged *them* to keep it from me! She had treated me, I felt, as if I had been a foolish child and she a self-consciously wise elder. And now she had gone. Well, let her go. I would not fret, or follow her, or be perturbed. She would come back. These superior heroics could not last. Perhaps she was really playing some deep game traditional with women—was using this disappearance to bring me to a sense of her value—was staking my loss of her against my interest in the affairs which had roused her jealousy. No doubt Mrs. Gallus and Peter were in the despicable plot, and had left the house to see her started on her journey. Well, I was not to be trifled with in this way. They should see.

And in that caddish mood of blind self-complacency I stalked from my room, down the stairs, and out of the house, walking like a man possessed to the newspaper office. Only when I joined old Merry in our room did the surging tide of hurt vanity and misconception begin to ebb, but even then I strove to adhere to my original resolution to be strong in the face of treachery, and fought back the truth within me by plunging myself into the night's work and the task of telling my chief that I and not the detestable Hillsdun was to succeed to his chair.

§ 5

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning when I returned to Prosperity Street. I was more sane now. Behind my anger with Joan—for that persisted—was a gnawing anxiety as to where she might be and how she might be faring. She had not trusted me, but she must be suffering. I did not dare to think just how she might be suffering, lest I lost the wrath which I was so callously and carefully nursing, but the thought obtruded itself. It threatened despite my will to conquer all else in my mind. And then, as I let myself into the house, came for the first time the intolerable sense of loss that, I like to think, was

a more just measure of my heart. This house without Joan. . . .

They were astir in the submerged kitchen, and as the noise of the closing door echoed through the hall Peter came up the stairs to greet me. He was wearing his overcoat and looked tired and jaded.

"Well!" he cried. "Have you found her?"

I shook my head.

"Agatha said you'd been home and had your letter, and had gone straight out again. Ma Gallus and I didn't wait for you. We went the round of the cab ranks and the stations as soon as we knew. She's still in Headley unless she has left by road on foot. But come down, man, and have something to warm you. You look like a man dazed. And no wonder, poor devil. Come on, Dogsboddy, don't fret. We'll find her all right."

He put an arm round my shoulder and drew me to the head of the stairs. I shook him off, not roughly.

"*I'm* not fretting," I said, and pushed past down the stairs.

In the kitchen sat Ma and Pa Gallus. He, the old mountebanking fool, as I thought him at that moment, would not resist the temptation to turn my own and especial private tragedy and trouble into histrionics. He rose and came towards me, flapping at me with his preposterous handkerchief. I could have sworn that he would take my hand, avert his head, let his shoulders droop, heave a sigh, and then return silently to his chair. It was exactly what he did. If I had been inclined to display any emotion, his action would have re-hardened me. It retarded any reaction of my own from the strain which had been on me throughout the day and all the night. But I felt that if Ma Gallus broke into one of her interminable monologues I should lose all restraints and release upon them the evil temper which I had generated. Peter Wass drew a chair for me before the fire. Ma Gallus heaved up her huge bulk and poured broth from a pan into a waiting

cup. Peter was straddling the rug, as he had so often done when we had talked together down here.

Ma Gallus returned to her rocking chair. I stared straight before me at the fire, finding nothing to say and not trusting myself to look at them.

"I'm sorry, Frank," said Peter simply.

"Sorry!" I cried hotly.

There was a moment's embarrassed silence, broken at last by Ma Gallus.

"That poor child!" she said, and inexplicably burst into tears, having until now suppressed her own honest grief. As she sat, rocking and blubbing in her chair, at once absurd and pathetic, and as her foolish old husband moved over and tried to comfort her, all the walls of my own reserve were washed away. I saw, in a flash, my own absurdity. I saw, too, that had I not come into this ménage, drawn here by chance and circumstance, Joan and these good people would have been undisturbed and happy together. It was I—I suddenly knew—who was innocently to blame for all our suffering, my own lacerations and theirs. Like any fool, I, too, turned my chair to the table, put down my cup, laid my head on my arms and fell to crying.

"Hell!" said Peter from the rug and then went quickly from the room, more deeply hurt than any of us, but facing his trouble like a realist, and stamping down the sentimentality that might, had he indulged it, have given him a little ease.

His abrupt exit steadied us. I pulled myself together. After all, it was but a storm in a tea-cup. To-morrow we would trace Joan and bring her back, and I would fling myself on her mercy. I would do what she wished. I would abandon Lawton and his grandiose schemes, would forsake my promising career and return to the earlier dream of being a writer of books and that only, would comfort her for all the agony of her youth, would overlay the terrible memory of her parents' broken home by the actu-

ality of a new home of her own where she and I, free now from misunderstanding, would be happy together. It was all growing simple again. My mood must have communicated itself to Ma Gallus, for she wiped her eyes on her blue-spotted print apron and sat up, looking ashamed of herself.

"There, there," she said, "we're overwrought all of us and ought to be in bed since we can't do no good by thinking about our girl at this time of the morning and her safe somewhere for the night and sure to come back in the morning when she's thought about it again and we'll burn the letters she left and forget all about it and make her happy and be happy ourselves and nobody a penny the worse for all this fuss and upset."

She spoke, as always, in one breathless rush of words. Pa Gallus patted her ample shoulder.

"That's right, my gel, that's right. We must be brave in the face of fortune's malignity. To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow. Once more unto the breach, dear friends." He looked at me, I am sure with the firm conviction that he was reinspiring me to a new courage. His face lighted up with a quite wonderful satisfaction. He had remembered, I fancied, a more than usually apt fragment from some half-forgotten part. I waited, tolerant again of his harmless foible, and the inevitable declamation came. "I'm going to seek her, fur and wide. If she should come while I'm away or if any hurt should come to me, remember that the last words I left for her was, my unchanged love is with my darling child, and I forgive her. I'm a-going to seek her. That's my dooty evermore!" He waited a moment, as if for our applause—and I greatly fear he said "chee-ild"—and then, remembering himself, said, by way of explanation, "Curtain, second act, 'Little Emily,' adapted by Garrick Gallus from that immortal work *David Copperfield*. Very apt. And now, to bed."

"Yes," said his wife, "we might as well go to our beds,

Mr. Paynim, for we'll be astir early to-morrow and some sleep would do us all no harm. . . ."

On a sudden impulse she stooped as she moved past me and kissed my hair, recalling me to a sense of my own duties. I rose and opened the door for her.

"It'll be all right to-morrow," she assured me.

I listened to her laboring ascent of the narrow stairs, responded automatically to the good-night of Pa Gallus, and returned to my seat by the fire. How long I sat I do not know, and how the events of the day turned and returned about my weary brain I cannot remember. But I know that, at last, I, too, went to bed. There was a light showing through the cracks of Peter's door, and I hesitated for a moment before passing it. But pass it I did, to fling myself fully clothed on to the quilt and to drop at once into the most profound and obliterating sleep.

CHAPTER TEN

§ I

BUT IN THE MORNING neither Pa Gallus nor I—nor anyone else—set out to "seek her fur and wide." I did a much more sensible thing. I confided my trouble to that eminently practical man, George Lawton, and before the day was out, he had set wires humming and placed official and unofficial people on the alert, and had had advertisements inserted in all the likely papers, tactful advertisements that Joan could not mistake but which conveyed no inkling of the real emotions behind them save that we all wanted her back again.

My hope was that she would repent her impulse and return. She didn't return. The next morning brought a brief note from her to Ma Gallus, written from London. She had made her way to a country station, like some fugitive criminal, and must have been well on her jour-

ney before Ma and Peter had begun their frenzied rounds of railways and cab ranks. She was all right, she said, and would write again. To me there came the briefest letter of three words. "Forgive me, Frank," she wrote, as if I had anything to forgive!

We were all subdued that day, but our nerves had relaxed their yesterday's strain sufficient to allow us to do our work in the world ostensibly as if nothing had happened to disturb contentment. The next day there was no further word, but the day following that—a Saturday—came another letter for me. You may guess how hungrily I tore it open, after one hasty glance at the familiar writing on the envelope and at the affrighting foreign stamp, adorned with France's Goddess of Liberty.

Dear Frank,

I shall not write again. I meant not to write at all, but I could not bear the thought of you all wondering what was happening to me. I miss you terribly, and I wish with half my heart that I had never left you. But I still feel that I have done the only thing that could have saved our happiness. Never forget me, Frank, will you? And remember that wherever I am I shall go on loving you and being proud of you. You are not to worry, for I have crossed to France to take work that awaits me. I have a letter from the Headley Art School. This is really "good-bye" for you can't trace me here and I shall give no sign. I love you. I love you.

JOAN.

And then, scrawled at the end, one more line,

"Tell Sinbad I'm sorry about everything."

I had a mad thought of renouncing everything, of foregoing my share in George's great coup, and following Joan to France, but I remembered, even in the glow of this resolution, that I had no money to carry me about the continent and that Joan might be anywhere. Even to search the ateliers of Paris would be a forlorn hope, and

to visit every art school, studio and dress-designing establishment in France, was out of all question.

Peter and I had visited already both the Headley School of Art and Madame Hester. There was nothing to be gleaned from either source as to Joan's intended movements. The letter of which she spoke could not be a specific recommendation to any particular post. It was but an open testimonial to her capacities as a mistress.

It was while Peter and I were discussing for the hundredth time some means of tracing her, sure in our hearts that she would succumb to a personal appeal, that I remembered one channel which might be of greater promise than any other.

"Sinbad," I cried, "the jail, we've forgotten the jail!"

He shook his head decisively.

"No, I thought of that first. I didn't tell you, but one of the first things I did was to find out where the mother is. I surmised that there must have been something more than chance in Joan's having come here when she did, so I tried Headley Jail first. The mother is there. But if you think Joan visits her or even writes to her, you're wrong. At her own request, Mrs. Agnew has neither received visits nor letters since the tragedy."

"But they must know where her next of kin is to be found. Supposing she dies or is released?"

"The only address they have is twenty-two Prosperity Street."

"But Joan will inform them."

"Yes. That's a hope. I've arranged for that. But she may not."

"You're a good sort, Sinbad."

"I know I am. But don't let's talk of it."

"Then what's to be done?"

"Nothing. Except wait. And forget, if you can."

"Forget!"

"Yes. Forget. Oh, you needn't be indignant. We'll forget, all right. Both of us."

"Forget Joan?"

"No, you ass. But forget what Joan has meant to us. Oh, yes, we shall. It's inevitable. Why don't once happy widowers go mad? Because they forget. Why do we call time 'the great healer'? Because it makes us forget. Why aren't we brooding over our dead parents? Because we forget. Joan's wiser than we are. She knows."

"Knows that we'll forget?"

"Knows just how we shall remember. That's what she prefers, that we should remember her when she was part of our youth, instead of seeing the elderly Joan and forgetting much more terribly the real girl. She thinks she's being brave and self-sacrificing for you. She isn't. She's indulging her vanity. Don't frown, Dogsbody. Joan has as much vanity as any other healthy human being. If I could find her, I'd tell her so. But I can't find her, nor can you. You know what I feel about her. I've never disguised it. Well, I'm going to get on with my job now, and trust to God Joan comes to her other senses and comes back to us. And I advise you to do the same."

"There isn't any option, is there?" I said wryly.

"No. That's just the point of the whole story. So we'd better make the best of it. We've got to settle down to things like a pair of sensible fellows. Joan's left us, and there is an end of that episode. But I tell you one thing, Peyton, we must get out of this place."

"Out of this house, you mean?"

"Yes, I can't have Joan's ghost at my elbow every time I sit to a meal or open the front door into the hall. We must get out."

"But . . ."

"Yes?"

"The Galluses? Damn it, Sinbad, from their point of view it isn't only a matter of sentiment, you know."

"No. I know. I've thought of that, too. We'll either stay on until they find new lodgers. . . . Good Lord, man, have you thought how we'd feel, you and I, if they bring

some strange girl into Joan's room? But don't let us get sentimental. We'll either stay on until they find new lodgers, or we must find the old boy a job that'll keep them. You say you are on the brink of running your damned newspaper. Why can't you get him a job there?"

"I might."

"Then you must. I shall find diggings at the other end of the town."

I thought for a moment.

"Peter," I said.

"Yes."

"Couldn't we . . . I mean, could we . . . I mean, I know that you must loathe the sight of me, but couldn't we dig in together somewhere?"

"Why, you fat-headed, blue-based ape! I meant that. It wasn't your fault, Dogsboddy. It was nobody's fault. Of course we shall dig in together. But not here."

I was not quite as fat-headed as he thought. I knew Peter's motive. He was going to see that Joan's going did not drive me to anything unworthy of Joan, since she had been fond of me. His next words confirmed it.

"But, look here, no moping. We've to work."

"I shall work all right," I assured him.

§ 2

I did work. From the day Peter and I left Prosperity Street I devoted every waking minute either to the *Chronicle* or to my book. Fortunately the preliminaries of the transfer of the property kept me incessantly at the newspaper office for many weeks, and after that George and I were bound like galley slaves to the venture. We had much to do, departments to reorganize, economies to inaugurate, extensions of effort to inspire and conduct.

But leaving Prosperity Street did not ease the aching sense of loss that had seized me after my first mood of angry resentment at Joan's going. The day Peter and I said good-bye and drove away in a crazy four-wheeler I

told myself that once in new surroundings I would shake off my loneliness for Joan, and would quietly await the day when of her own volition she should return. We escaped from the roof of Garrick Gallus without any scenes of any kind, for to our fat landlady's laments during the week or so before we uprooted ourselves we had opposed the undeniable facts that we should still be within reach of her, that her house now was to be her own, since Pa Gallus was, by the coöperation of George, duly installed as a comfortably paid member of our despatch room, with duties involving nothing more strenuous than the occupancy of a wooden armchair and the checking of news-agents' lists.

I think Ma Gallus was a little frightened at the prospect of her house being her own. She had been so long accustomed to having her three young lodgers about her that I think she feared the loneliness which would beset her when the last of them went. And yet, I somehow knew, the idea of ruling her house as a lady of settled means, with Agatha to wait upon her and take her orders, also had its attraction. Not that she would ever rule her house so. She was born to comfort the kitchen by her pleasant and portly presence, as comfort it she would—and did—until the day of her death. But the possibilities of being able to recast herself for a part which her varying fortunes had not before allowed her to play was a consolation, I saw, for her genuine despair at our departure.

So Peter and I had one last tea as her kitchen guests, sampled her patty cakes and approved her baking, left gifts for Marion Mary, made our leaving presents to Agatha, still mourning more ostensibly than any of us the absence of Joan, and slipped easily away, bound by promises to return at intervals and by a pledge to grace when we could the convivial circle of the "Singing Sambo," the members of which had only been restrained by Pa Gallus's tact from making our departure from the neighbor-

hood the occasion of a special fête in our honor. And as we drove along the familiar streets, haunted for both of us, I made firm my resolution neither to grieve nor grow angry again, but to await Joan's return in patience and a manly fortitude.

But grieve I did, and often I grew angry, as the months went by. The mornings when I sat in our new lodgings and wrote, the afternoons and evenings when I edited the *Chronicle*, sitting in old John Merry's chair with a leader writer of my own to instruct as Merry had instructed me, the early mornings when we went feverishly through the first editions—these were tolerable. It was the walk home through the quiet empty streets, and the last tangled hour before sleep, the week-end hours when, tired of writing, I strode out into the country to shake off my desire for her or tried to persuade myself that I was concentrating my mind on some play or some concert to which Peter had dragged me, it was the odd moments of thought between occupations that fretted me. Then she would possess me so that I almost saw her before me, almost held her in my arms, almost gave again the kisses to her lips that once signaled my love to her.

But Peter was right. Gradually I forgot. Gradually the other things crowding my life obscured my real memory of Joan. The hope with which I began each day, the hope that Agatha would come to say that Joan had returned or had written, ceased to brighten the mornings and the realization that not that day would she come back ceased to darken the evenings. I found myself mixing again with Lavrin and June Wilmot and Ashington Ablet and Hughes and Raymond James and all the others who had made our circle. I became able to say casually that we had no news from Joan without becoming flushed and indignant, and gradually they forgot to ask. Then, as George and I made the paper by degrees more and more prosperous, I was taken away from that futile, bohemian, jolly circle, and drawn into groups of older and more solid men who

had never heard of Joan, and to whom I was no sentimentalist dreaming of a girl who had run from him, but one as solid as they, if a little younger.

The months went past, each vanishing into time more speedily than the last. I was growing up quickly. The boy of twenty-two was the man of twenty-three after a year of congested and assorted experience. And the young man of twenty-three was a prematurely middle-aged man at twenty-five, and at twenty-eight, after three years of joint control of a provincial newspaper enterprise, he was a man of no age at all, but something of a specialized machine, humanized only because the functions of such a machine as he had become brought him into touch with all phases and activities of humanity.

Board meetings, public dinners, staff conferences, political committees, interviews with contributors, discussions of technical problems with George, long talks about life with Peter Wass, an annual appearance at the Soirée of the Party which was "so ably supported" by the *Headley Chronicle*—these, and my nightly articles and routine duties were my life, and in it Joan had less and less place. I must have been, I suppose, a very eligible young man in the eyes of the hostesses of the town. By local standards I was something of a phenomenal success, and I was invited now and again to Wexminster Towers, itself a cachet of distinction. But save for the most casual of interchanges I rarely spoke with any woman. I had deliberately and conscientiously done with women. The passion that Joan had stirred in me, her departure had damped down. The fires, I was to learn, were not out, they smoldered within me still. But, for those strenuous three years, they did not betray their existence by so much as a passing twinge of desire. I was still too hurt for love and I had always been too fastidious for harlotry. And in my own sullen way I was being true to Joan, who stayed *away* and gave no sign.

§ 3

It was one afternoon towards mid-November that George Lawton came into my room as I sat dictating letters to an estimable old gentleman who might have been my father rather than my secretary.

"Hello, George," I greeted him, "do you want me?"

The secretary had risen but George waved him back into his chair. The three years had not been without effect upon my "hero as business man." Good times suited him. He had filled out a little both in face and figure and had shed all his old vulgarity. He was speaking the Queen's English now without effort, the transition stage safely over. He had for so long modeled himself on the millionaire Empire-maker that the style had in very truth become the man.

"Are you dining alone to-night, Peyton?"

"Yes."

"I'll join you."

"Good."

"I'll book a small room at the Central. I want to have a long talk."

"Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Wrong? No. Quite the contrary. Shall we say half-past seven?"

We did say half-past seven, and at that time we were drinking sherry together, while a waiter, holding his Mr. Lawton in a wholesome awe born of experience, busied himself for our comfort. Not until our meal was ended and this too eager servitor dismissed did George begin to unbosom himself.

"How long is it since you went up to your old diggings, Peyton?"

The question caused me no concern.

"Some few weeks ago," I hazarded.

"Months," said George laconically.

I thought for a moment.

"Yes. You are right. It is some months. Many months. I'm always meaning to go, but somehow I never have time."

"Your friend Wass goes fairly regularly."

"Yes. I suppose he does."

"Doesn't he give you all the news of the old home?"

"No. He doesn't say much about them."

"I suppose you don't know that the girl Agatha is to be married?"

"No! Is she really? Good heavens, George, it seems an age since I—since we—since she came to that house."

The recollection of our rescue of Agatha caused me no more than a glow of what I can only call tender memory. I remembered Joan in a kind of sentimental haze. I remembered myself. I smiled at the thought of Nat Grim. That was all. There was no longer any real emotion of pain, and certainly no self-censure. George was looking at me keenly.

"Well?" he said.

"Well?" I returned. Then, as I dragged myself back from my memory of the orphanage, I said, tardily, "Who's to marry Agatha?"

"I am."

This did rouse me.

"You!"

"Yes. Me. Any objections?"

"Objections! My dear fellow! I'm only too delighted. But I didn't know you had any feeling that way.."

"What? Towards marriage, or towards Agatha?"

"Towards either."

"Well, I have. I liked that girl the very first time I saw her, Peyton. It was the day I came up to tell you about Hillsdun. Do you remember? When you and Wass left the place I began to go up there in the evenings. You know how it is. A man gets lonely in the evenings, and once we'd got the paper I couldn't do the things I'd been used to doing. So I began to take things a little seriously. What

I needed was a bit of education, you know. I bought one of Hillsdun's damned self-educators, and Agatha and I settled down together in your old sitting-room to go into everything."

"But I'd no idea. . . ."

"I didn't want you to have any idea."

My mind had a sudden picture of this ambitious proletarian following all the best and most priggish guides to self-help and dragging with him to new heights of culture the wan waif that institutional life had once so terribly saddened. It is strange how blind we are to the romances of others.

"What does Agatha say about it?" I asked.

The hero as business man amazingly blushed.

"Well, you see, she likes me," he explained.

"Yes . . ." I prompted him. He burst into a flood of justifications.

They were complementary. His force and her tenderness would make it a perfect match. She knew how to look after a man and his home. He couldn't now do without her. She and myself were the only two real friends he had. I didn't realize what it meant to be friendless. I was one of the lucky ones. I made friends easily. I had had advantages. I saw all that, didn't I? And besides life wasn't all work. Work, after all, was only the price men paid for happiness out of their work. Not that he meant work wasn't worth while for its own sake. It was. Agatha saw that. But it wasn't everything, didn't I see? A man wanted a home of his own, and a wife to grace it. Not any wife, of course. He hoped he didn't sound casual. One couldn't be absolutely frank about one's feelings in these things. I saw that, too, didn't I? Knowing him and knowing Agatha I would understand that this was what we writing chaps called a love match. And Agatha was to be a lady. Why should she not be a lady! Miss Agnew and I had given her her first chance. They both appreciated that tremendously. Some men beginning to grow rich and

important would be scared of marrying a girl out of service. He was proud of it. He and Agatha were of the same class. He was proud of that, too. People shouldn't marry out of their own class. They should grow up together from class to class, if I followed him? And Agatha and he wanted me to be the best man.

So his flood of talk swirled round me. His own joy and pride in the event, seasoned by just a touch of natural shamefacedness, which afflicts all men announcing an engagement, infected me. I put out my hand to him and assured him that he couldn't be doing a better thing for himself. I praised Agatha for all her quiet virtues.

"I knew you'd be pleased, Peyton," he said.

"Pleased! I'm more than pleased."

"Good. And now I want to talk business."

"Talk away."

"We've made a success of the paper, Peyton."

"I suppose we have, relatively speaking."

"I mean, there can be no doubt now of its possibilities. What we ought to do now is to refloat."

"Why should we refloat. Surely our capital is adequate, and as far as you and I are concerned no arrangement could be better than the present one."

"I'm not so sure. How do we stand? We hold two thousand five hundred ordinary shares each and one founder's share. We are declaring twelve per cent. this year on a property that was making nothing three years ago. We are drawing good salaries. And we are the two indispensable men. But the better we do, the more chance of competition hitting us. The old *News* will be waking up soon. What we ought to do now, Peyton, is to persuade the Board to refloat. And I'll tell you on what basis."

He took from his breast pocket a sheaf of documents. It was eminently characteristic of him that he did not even approach me, his one intimate, until his scheme was cut and dried. After half-an-hour's talk he had convinced me that his proposal was sound. We were to refloat and

George Lawton and Francis Gerrard Peyton were to emerge not this time with an unexpected two thousand five hundred pounds but with a sum sufficient to make each of them independent of any adverse fortune which might afflict the *Headley Chronicle*. He reserved his strongest argument to the last.

"You know, Peyton, I've done a lot of thinking this last few months."

"I see you have."

"Ah, I mean real thinking. Not just this financial jugglery. I don't know how it is with you, but three years ago all I wanted out of life was to manage the paper. Well, I've managed it. And I'm tired of the game. Oh, I don't mean tired of the paper. I mean tired of all the pettifoggish details of management. I begin to see that I needn't go on. Having routined the show as I wanted it, I can hire a man now to watch it run, while I sit back and think out bigger things. Do you follow me?"

"Yes. I follow you. I've been thinking much the same way. Why should I go on as old Merry went on all those years, doing the routine side that any competent journalist could do. All I really want now is to direct the big things and to write an article of my own when I feel like it. I don't want to sit night after night going over proofs and discussing lay-out. Not really. I'm like you, George, I have had my experience of that. It was excellent at first, but it palls. And what's more, a man grows stale."

"Ahhhh!" said George, nodding a sage head.

"That's why Merry and Dick Chamberlain let the paper down. They grew stale and indifferent. But how will the refloatation help us?"

"Very materially. We shall have more available capital. We can afford to increase the salary list. What we could do would be to change our titles. Here am I, general manager with a seat on the Board. Here are you, editor with a seat on the Board. After the new flotation,

I'll become Managing Director, out and out, and you become General Editor."

"What difference will that make?"

"All the difference. I'll employ a general manager. You'll employ an acting editor. See?"

"I see."

"And besides, as soon as the new company is formed I'm going to launch an evening paper."

"The devil you are! But that'll be a risky venture."

"Not it. I tell you, Peyton, here we are at the end of the 'nineties and not an evening paper in the city."

"Very few provincial cities have evening papers."

"But they are going to have 'em. I've been thinking this out. The evening paper is going to be the big money maker of the future. Why? Because first of all in every big city you are beginning to get a host of people who go a long way home after the offices and factories close."

"Well?"

"Those people buy a morning paper. What do they do with it? Take it out of the house, read it on the tram and throw it away. Suppose they buy an evening paper. What will they do with it? Read it on the tram—and take it home."

"You mean . . .?"

"How do papers make their money? By advertisers' revenue. Right. Which is more use to an advertiser, the paper that goes out of the home, read by one person and *that* a man, or the paper that is read by a man, goes home, stays there, and is read by his wife and his daughter and the maid? Look here, Peyton, I'm an old hand at trying to persuade people to buy space. Give me an evening paper and I'll sell more space in it in five minutes than I could sell in the *Chronicle* in five days. Of course, it won't be a paper that *you'd* call a paper. There'll be no politics much. It'll be all news and gossip."

"Gossip?"

It seems absurd now that his use of the word should

have baffled me. But in those days gossip was not a purveyable article.

"Yes. Gossip. You know. Little pars about the old Duke of Wexminster and his family. Bits about the May-oress. And then there'll be sport. The bigger this town grows the more people there are who want to know who's won. It may be horses or football, but they are keen to know the winner. If we can get the winners on to the streets before a man has time to learn the winners any other way, we'll sell thousands. My idea is to run about three editions. . . ."

He went on to talk technicalities, I catching fire from his enthusiasm.

"Let us get an evening paper out before the old *News* wakes up, and in three years, Peyton, we'll be really rich men. I don't mean men with a few thousands, but men who can talk money."

"I don't know that I'm anxious to talk money, George."

"Oh, yes, you are. You don't know it. But you are. Dammit, Peyton, you are not going to stay here all your life. I know what you are driving towards. You're going into politics. Well, go into 'em and with a group of newspapers behind you. We've finished with the day when big landlords and factory owners can dominate the whole blooming universe. We're the new men, Peyton, people like you and me."

"And the Hillsduns," I said wickedly.

"Well, why not? The Hillsduns. They gave me my first ideas. Force of example and all that kind of thing. Let's face it. They *are* the new men. And I'm not ashamed to take a leaf from their book. I've taken a good many from their sixpenny self-educator."

"And what about you, George, when I'm a rich man in politics?"

"I'll be a rich man out of 'em. Agatha and I are going to enjoy life. Villas in the sun. Good food, good clothes, good things to read and pleasant things to see. Children,

perhaps. Well brought up and not half-starved for everything that makes a kid happy. I tell you this, Peyton, if we can refloat and get an evening paper on the streets, in five years we can sell out if we want to. I don't suppose we'll want to, but that won't matter. But you'll have to back me. The Board take a darn sight more notice of you than of me. Funny, that, coz I've been the practical brains of the show, haven't I? It's because your personality's different from mine. You're clever. I'm only pushful."

"Don't be bitter, George," I laughed.

"Bitter! I'm not bitter. I'm only too grateful that fate threw us together. Between the two of us we've done wonders. We're a pair of walking miracles. Aren't we?"

"I suppose we are. And now I must get back. My leader proof will be down."

As we parted at the door of the hotel some compunction seemed to grip him. He held my hand rather longer than the parting shake demanded.

"I say, Peyton?"

"Yes."

"Good of you to back me and Agatha."

"Not a bit, George. I'm fond of you both."

"Yes, I know. But you weren't as lucky as I've been. She never wrote again to you, did she?"

I shook my head.

"She did it for the best," he anxiously assured me.

"I know that. I suppose Agatha's been talking to you about her."

He nodded.

"The best thing you can do, Peyton," he said, "is to come out of your shell a bit. Talk to other women. Ease the ache a bit, see? Don't want to butt in. Sorry. But thought you'd like to know that I appreciate things. Oh, damn you. Good night, Peyton."

§ 4

But it was another three years before I followed the wise advice of George and came out of my shell, three years that I see now in crowded retrospect, years of even closer attention to the business of the *Headley Chronicle* and the ephemeral interests of "the party"—that amorphous conglomeration of local nonentities and national celebrities which had come to control so much of me. Looking back I recall the anxious days of our refloatation and of the founding of the new property which, as its "onlie begetter" had foreseen, was from the first, in the jargon of that day, a little gold mine. And I recall, too, the publication of my two first books, and their kindly reception, which gave me, as it were, another status in the eyes of my surrounding fellows, and which tied to my ankles, had I known it, another chain.

So I seemed to emerge from the twenties into the early thirties as a young man of unusual promise, of gratifying substance and performance, but of aloof and lonely habits.

Isolated incidents stand out. There was Agatha's marriage to George, with Pa Gallus giving away the bride and Peter and I resplendent in clothes that put even the bridegroom's careful attire to shame, and Marion Mary and her friend Miss Winterbottom making the bride pallid by their colorful presence as her maids. There was many an excursion into political controversy and many a sally into the field of literary polemics. And there were days when unaccountably my need for Joan became the dominating thing in my life, and all else was a vain shadow-play, nights when I lay sleepless wondering where she might be, and remembering the soft whiteness of her young bosom, the warmth of the lithe body pressed to mine, the caress of her hands and the fulfilling comfort of her voice. It was after such moods that I became most aggressively the purposeful accomplice of my forceful

friend. It must have been after such a mood that I became aware of Florence, and under her compelling lure abandoned the reserve towards women that for so long I had cultivated and preserved.

BOOK TWO
FLORENCE

CHAPTER ELEVEN

§ 1

I AM TRYING, as you know, to keep from my story of myself anything more than an indication of the political developments which eventually brought me to the historic room in which I now write. My official biographer will some day explore that side of my life. Already there exist two small brochures and I know not how many isolated essays and pamphlets expounding my public career and rashly purporting to account for my attitudes, my avowals, my significance and my efforts. There is also one flattering, and, I confess, to me, heartening volume which examines my claim to consideration as a writer. But what I am trying to do, as honestly as I may, is to tell, in Richard Jeffries' phrase, the story of my heart. It must read as a kind of prig's progress, an egoist's epic. Yet at no stage of my development was I conscious of being either a prig or unduly egoistic. If you are to appreciate the little worlds through which I moved, you must share with me a quite ingenuous zest for merely being alive amongst people whose mere existence was a stimulant, and feel with me a perpetual sense of miracle in the fact that I awoke each morning to confront a universe so obligingly ready to amuse and interest me.

It was in such a spirit of gratified participation in the grotesque carnival of life that I helped to elect a successor to Sir Andrew Marten, that worthy ironmaster called at last to his family vault and his last judgment, and gave my vote for Mr. William Bowden as the new Chairman of the Light Blues of Headley.

William Bowden was very much a figure in the indus-

trial life and civic affairs of the town. His father after selling pieces of cloth in the open market had managed to establish himself in a shop, which, under the driving force of mid-Victorian economic currents, had become a small factory. The son, now a man approaching sixty, had extended the factory and its products into an organization which was the boast of Headley, a wholesale clothing enterprise second to none in the county and with but a few peers in the kingdom. Bowden himself had acquired a manner compounded of chuckling affability and dictatorial dogmatism. He could charm a mixed circle of the free and independent electors of Headley by chaffing them in their own vernacular, and thus win for a peroration of almost angry platitudes their riotous applause. In Committee he would jockey men into his own way of thinking by sheer geniality, and only when his end had been attained would he suddenly shed that manner to reveal himself as a portentous and self-sufficient Polonius. He had always had an exaggerated regard for me and I had seen in him an incarnation of the traditional John Bull which had attracted me. He blundered and he blustered and displayed a dozen characteristics which irked one's finer sensibilities, but he had a core of kindness and sincere purpose which redeemed all his faults.

We walked together from our Committee room to the Headley Club, it being the unbreakable local custom that all elevations to office must be sanctified by a libation. We were sturdy Britons, who would not dream of anointing our elected man, but he would have lacked some sacramental virtue had we not drunk his health at his expense.

"I'm obliged to you for your support, Peyton. Power of the Press—what? Suppose I'll have to send you a couple of gross of overcoats to keep you sweet, in case you rat before the general meeting." He chuckled until I feared he would either bring on apoplexy or sever his head on

the rim of his enormous collar. "But I wanted the job. Don't mind confessing it. No use for these fellas who pretend office is a nasty duty. It isn't. If a man has any kind of executive capacity, of course he ought to be in some kind of office. But I didn't expect a cultured scholar like you would vote for a rag dealer like me." Again came the alarming chuckle. "I know all about you, you see, young Peyton. Got your books at home. I always say it's a funny way of making a living, wasting paper." This time he emphasized his jocularly by thrusting a finger into my ribs. "But if the general meeting ratifies me, Peyton, I'm not going to do the job as old Marten did it. He cheapened it. Trotting round to every potty Ward meeting. Vain old devil. Speak no ill of the dead—what? But as vain as they make 'em. I'm going to concentrate on organization. Let the Ward Chairmen run their own Wards and I'll run the headquarters for 'em. I say, Peyton, when are you going to give us the pleasure of entertaining you at our mahogany? Can't give you the kind of talk you get at Wexminster Towers, but we can give you food worth eating and a glass of port worth drinking."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Bowden. But as you know, my hours are rather erratic. And besides. . . ."

"Now—no excuses. You young dog, you won't waste time on a middle-class family circle. I know you. I know—you. But no excuses, no excuses. Shall we say Saturday? I know that Saturday is your night. There isn't any paper on Sunday. Next Saturday?"

Before I knew it, I had allowed myself to be committed.

"Splendid. What I say is, that friendly intercourse round a dinner table is worth all the formal consultations in the world. A man isn't my friend unless he makes my house his own. What about your great crony, the architect fella?"

"What—Peter Wass?"

"That's the fella. Smart fella that. Plays a good game of snooker. Ask him, too."

"Why not ask him yourself? He'll be in the Club."

"Why not! Nobody ever accused Bill Bowden of being shy, to my knowledge. But will he come?"

"He will if he knows I'm coming."

"You never know with you professional men. They don't always mix with trade. But if the worst comes to the worst I'll commission a row of houses." This seemed to him the very cream of wit, for he stood on the steps of the Club shaken by his chuckles and looking back for the rest of our party. He was a man of unusual bulk, whose round and ruddy face seemed the fuller of contour because of the close cropped mutton-chop whiskers which framed it. His bull neck filled out the great starched collar he affected, the wide frontal opening of which allowed his three chins to ripple down to his short throat in relative comfort. He wore, habitually, a short double-breasted jacket of a nautical savor and trousers that flapped about his legs, so wide and generously cut were they.

The hall porter brought Peter from the billiard room to join our celebration. Mr. Bowden had insisted upon champagne but Peter refused to drink anything but bottled beer. He and our newly elected chairman stood together, in odd contrast.

"Well, Bowden," said Peter, dropping the Mr. as if his interlocutor had been his oldest friend or his junior coachman, "Here's luck. I suppose what you are really after is contracts for government clothing."

This was exactly the approach that Mr. Bowden understood and appreciated. They berated each other for some moments on the relative virtues of Bowden's clothes and Peter's houses and town halls, the elder man punctuating his share of the duologue with leers and winks at the rest of us, partly to convey how smart a hand he was at repartee and partly to assure us that

here were two good fellows who didn't mean a word they were saying.

To my relief Peter instantly accepted the invitation to dine. He was sitting over the fire reading when I returned to our rooms later in the evening. We had now no separate and distinctive landlady, for our sitting-room and the two attached bedrooms were part of a large and extremely imposing private hotel, which was later to become glorified into a set of "residential chambers" by the simple process of painting out the old name on the sign and painting in the new.

"Hullo, Dogsboddy!" he said as I entered.

"Hullo, Sinbad."

"Where's your friend Bill Bowden? Left him in the hall?"

"My friend! You mean your friend. You and he were like a pair of professional music-hall comedians."

"He is a queer old boy, isn't he? Rolling in money, they tell me."

"Yes. I suppose he is."

"Money and no real responsibility. That's the kind of fella to be, Dogsboddy. They tell me his son's a bit of a wreck."

"What kind of a wreck?"

"No brains, and an infinite capacity for taking liquor and odds. There's a daughter who's a bit of a high stepper."

I was busy with the seltzogene, mixing myself a night-cap to rival the beaker of whisky and soda with which Peter had been sustaining his interest in life. I looked over from the side table. Peter was regarding me with a satirical gleam in his eyes.

"Pon my soul, Sinbad, you seem to have investigated the old boy's affairs pretty thoroughly."

"No. Not really. I just let a few idle questions fall. Billiard room not very interested in new political chairman, but ready to gossip. They are like a lot of old

maids, these young provincial bloods. It struck me that if I am going with you into the lion's den on Saturday, we might as well know what the denizens are like. By the way, do they dress?"

"I don't know. I should think so. Oh, yes, they are bound to, for us. We're professional people."

"I see. If we had been grocers or butchers we should have been invited to a high tea at five. Being professional people—if *your* damned confidence trick is a profession—we go to dinner at seven-thirty. Let's cry off, Dogsbody, and go to the Cave of Harmony instead. Think how they'd welcome you after all these weary years."

"Don't be an ass, Sinbad."

"Right-oh. The dinner it is. But 'ware the high stepper!"

"Damn the high stepper."

§ 2

William Bowden lived in a red brick house which was one of a long road of similar detached "residences" which, with their gardens, glorified the beginnings of the main road leading out of Headley from the South. As Peter paid off our cabman and arranged for his return at an hour calculated from a basis of Peter's private estimate of our capacity to endure boredom, I surveyed "The Hollies" and its surroundings. The garden at the front was too short to need a carriage drive to the front door and was entered by a single gate of wrought iron, from which a straight path ran to the steps. I suspected the existence of stables at the rear of the house, for beyond a narrow gravel pathway which curved away to the left there was no means of communication from front to back. There would be, doubtless, a narrow back street upon which would abut the tradesmen's entrance and the stable gate.

The house itself was of that ugly double-fronted kind with which the builders of the eighteen-seventies had lit-

tered the better quarters of the town. It had four bulging bay windows each with a very white stone sill, and in order that its rectangular regularity should not be in any way disturbed there was a small flat oblong window over the door, lighting a dressing-room, and two dormers in the sloping roof. The approach from the path to the porch was by means of four broad steps, on the lowest of which were perched two funereal urns in which two sickly evergreen plants languished.

Every window was ablaze with light as we walked together towards the steps.

"It's a party!" said Peter.

"Let us hope not," I piously prayed.

"I'll just bet you a new hat, Dogsbody, that it is a regular slap-up party. We've been trapped, old son."

I didn't need a new hat, but I took the bet, and then halted my companion by the urns to make a reservation.

"What do you call a party?"

"Anybody other than the family."

"No. Not good enough, Peter. If we're Bowden's guests we must give son and daughter a friend each. Anything more than that is a party."

"All right. Now for it."

He seized the bell-pull and tugged at it with decision. I heard him swear softly.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"Have you ever noticed, Dogsbody, that these imposing villas always have broken bells and rickety gates? I'll bet you another new hat that there are at least three minor gas leaks and that the bath pipes don't work properly. They never do. Where's the confounded knocker?"

There was no confounded knocker, and we were reduced to hammering discreetly with our bare knuckles on the leaded glass of the inner door.

"Some day," announced Peter, "the English will learn

to build houses with everything properly fitted. Some day we'll have . . ."

His discourse was interrupted by the opening of the door. A tolerably trim maid, a trifle flushed and breathless, as if she had been called from some other and more strenuous duty, stood before us. Behind her, at the far end of the hall, an elaborately gowned girl of about twenty-five glided swiftly across our field of vision, like some ornate phantom, balancing a tray of what I think must have been custard cups, since custard cups were later a prominent feature of the table. A rumbling and very flat voice somewhere within was singing mournfully and in the manner of Pa Gallus that the horn of the hunter was heard o'er the hill.

We stepped in and the maid relieved us of our hats and coats.

"What's names, please?" she asked.

We told her.

"It is a party," said Peter in my left ear, half mournfully and half triumphantly.

"Mr. Peyton and Mr. Wasp," announced the girl, opening the door on the right of the hall.

We went in. The figure of our host confronted us. He was gorgeous in his evening array, a diamond stud the size of a farthing twinkling in his shirt front and a red flower bedecking his buttonhole. He was in the midst of decanting a bottle of sherry to the tune of Kathleen Mavourneen. He broke from his melodic accompaniment to greet us.

"Ullo, ullo! Glad to see you. Shake hands in a minute when I've poured this. Glad to see you both. Glad to see you." Then, as though to assure us that there was no doubt in the matter he added, "Very glad."

"Hello, Bowden," said Peter, with that cool address that I always envied him, "I'm afraid we're a bit early." We were actually ten minutes late.

"Early? No. But we're a bit behindhand. It's a rum

thing, no matter how you staff this house or what you spend on it, it won't run to time. Never did, and never will. Pair o' bachelors like you fellows won't understand how many things can go wrong in a house. But they do. I'm danged if I understand it, reely. There! That's as good a decanter of sherry as you'll find in Headley. Or the county, either, for that matter. And now, how are you both?"

He shook our hands with hearty bonhomie.

"Well, mother'll be down in a minute, and Flo. Bert isn't at home. Bert never is at home. 'Pon me soul, I don't know what these young fellas do with themselves. When I was his age I was working in the counting house until ten each night. Times change. And now, you drunken young rascallions, how about sampling this sherry? Jus' to give us an appetite."

He handed to each of us a generous glass, never made for an aperitif, filled to the very point of overflowing with the brown liquor. Over the three rims we surveyed each other, Bill Bowden beaming, Peter Wass with his friendly satirical smile, and I, I do not doubt, grinning uncomfortably, since I was never gifted with any real social aplomb.

"'Success to temperance!'" said our host and chuckled alarmingly before he drank his own toast.

There was no denying his taste in sherry. The liquor was an elixir.

"Well, boys, what do you think of that?"

"Upon my word, Bowden, you do yourself well!" said Peter, drowning in his boisterous response my more modest "very good." "I suppose this comes from grinding the faces of the poor and sweating your work-girls—hey?"

"Yes. That's it. I'm a damned old spider sucking their blood. A regular screwflint, I am." His whole anatomy shook with his mirth, so that I feared his great diamond stud would fly from its setting. When he was

composed again he shook a sage head at us. "But you're right. I do do myself well. The man who doesn't do himself well when he can do himself well doesn't know what doing himself well means to a man."

He was evidently under the impression that he had enunciated some profound philosophical truth, had formulated an omnibus maxim containing the root truths of all metaphysical and ethical rightness. His frank gaze wandered round the room, my own eyes following his. It was a room, he patently thought, of which Headley itself should be proud. The wall paper was of yellow flowers on a cream ground, the mantel was burdened with a mantelboard of yellow from which gilt fringe drooped ornately towards the marble fireplace. In startlingly gilt frames a round dozen blatant water-colors, looking suspiciously as if they had been painted to order from a single pattern, adorned the three windowless walls and at each side of the bay on the fourth wall was a plaster statue, one depicting in faithful colors a languishing Moorish girl with a water jug on her shoulder, and the other a fierce Moorish gentleman, possibly her lover, whose pistols and sword were lavishly adorned with gilt that reduced his red and orange mantle to relative quietude. The furniture, covered in yellow plush, included a double-ended sofa and two vast easy chairs, three straight-backed and decidedly uneasy chairs, two small tables, a display cabinet, a whatnot, and an upright piano, the top of which supplied a platform upon which rested a generous collection of framed photographs, prevented from scratching the wood by the forethought of some careful person who had spread beneath them a damask runner. The piano itself asserted its right to a place in the decorative scheme by the two panels of its case in which, behind a lattice, yellow satin was stretched so tightly that its puckers were revealed as a cunningly contrived kilting and not as an artless draping effect, as, I am sure, one was supposed to think them. The mantel-

board, the two small tables, the display cabinet and the whatnot were crowded with a medley of other photographs, pieces of small china, imitation Chinese curios, models in wood of sailing ships and cathedrals and small boxes covered with sea shells. On two of the recess shelves of the whatnot were small white busts of Her Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria, and her late Consort, Albert the Good, fashioned when the royal lady was still a girlish bride and wore her hair in a knot at the back of her not unshapely head. The carpet beneath our feet was of a pattern that irresistibly reminded me of a rolled-out plum cake, for on a background of light brown were clustered innumerable crystals of black—squares, hearts, diamonds, groups of small parallel lines, circles and ovals, and I know not what other forms, all looking exactly like formless bits of cooked plum, were there.

The joint survey of this room by Mr. Bowden and me was over in a few seconds. We returned to our sherry, he refreshed again by the wonder of his possessions, and I a little refreshed by the wonder of his wonder.

"Yes. I do myself well," he repeated. "By the way, Peyton, haven't seen you since the Committee. Meant to drop you a line thanking you for what the paper said about my election. That ought to make the general meeting safe, my boy. I tell you, you and me together can make the party what we like in this town. Transform Headley, we will, into a model city."

"A model city?" said Peter, quietly.

"Yes. Low rating and plenty of over-time."

"I see."

"Yes. And get a Bill through Parliament to take in Longshaw and Worrall and those other urban districts and then run steam trams instead of horse uns."

"Steam trams. You approve of steam trams?"

"Yes. I'm for progress as long as progress doesn't mean . . . But here's mother!"

I had met my hostess once or twice before at party

and friendliness as that which redeemed the elder woman's face from plainness.

"Ah, there you are, at last, my dear. Come in and shut the draught out. Mr. Peyton, Mr. Wass, this is my daughter, Florence."

She closed the door behind her by a mere graceful movement of one arm and bowed to us from where she stood.

"How do you do?" she said. Her voice was of that rich contralto which always seems to throb with suppressed passion and to presage tragedy. I understood at that moment why a footman had burst into tears when Mrs. Siddons asked him for potatoes. "Dinner is quite ready, Mother," she then announced. Having so delivered herself she came into the center of the room. "You'll have to forgive us. This is a very happy-go-lucky household," she said to Peter and me.

"That's right. No formality about us," her father confirmed her. "We're homely folks, even if we do run the Party, eh, Peyton? Flo is our only real lady. Mother and I didn't go to school in Belgium, did we mother? But you don't despise your old home, do you, my dear? Like some people we know. Don't despise your old fat-headed father, eh?"

"Of course I don't despise you, Papa. Why should I? You are the only fat-headed father I shall ever have."

"That's a good one, that is. But come on, you people, if dinner is quite ready, we're quite ready for dinner."

He tucked the sherry decanter under his arm and opened the door.

"No ceremony, now."

Despite the injunction Peter gravely offered his arm to our hostess. I awkwardly proffered mine to her daughter, who, with a little laugh, as if to assure me that she shared the jest of this parody of real manners, laid her fingers gently upon my sleeve, but not so gently that I was unaware of a disturbance at my heart that I had not

known since, to the odor of cooking sausages in the kitchen at Prosperity Street, I had first taken Joan's hand into my own.

CHAPTER TWELVE

§ 1

I COULD, WITH very little effort, recapture every incident of our dinner that night. I remember only too vividly Mr. Bowden's hearty hospitality as he ladled out soup, or served the fish, or carved the joint for the flustered maids to carry round the table, and Mrs. Bowden's slow talk about her garden and her domestic interests. I have but to lean back in my chair and close my eyes to conjure again a mental picture of Peter Wass, looking extremely cool and handsome, playing the gallant to his hostess and occasionally treating her daughter to a word or a glance with a cautious courtesy which told me that he feared her vampire charms. But it is Florence who absorbs my recollection. I was seated next to her, and her nearness was itself an intoxication. Her ringlets brushed my cheek as she turned her head. She emanated a subtle perfume that was dangerously like an aphrodisiac to the almost monk-like young man at her elbow. And her talk bewitched me. She spoke of Headley not with scorn but with a kind of contemptuously understanding tolerance, and related adventures in esthetic satisfaction which had befallen her abroad. Brussels and Paris were as familiar to her as her native town, and she seemed to have a knowledge of London unusually intimate for the daughter of a provincial magnate of those days. She was well read, and compared her own school life in Belgium with the experiences of Charlotte Brontë with such insight into essentials that I felt her not my mental equal

but my intellectual superior. She was in the first lustrium of the twenties, but her assurance and her high command of her own faculties made her not ten years my junior but a goddess of static and ageless perfection.

The meal wound its way honestly to cheese, disdaining to recognize the existence of savories and the interloping courses of more pretensions catering. While Peter and our host munched stilton and nibbled celery the two ladies and I partook delicately of custard from cups and jelly from high ribbed glasses. Coffee and the port arrived together. Florence and her mother fled before the onslaught of three cigars, but it was only for the length of a cigar that we were parted from them, Mr. Bowden assuring us that pipes and cigarettes were tolerated everywhere in that homely house.

In the drawing-room the girl was put through her paces by her Papa, much as a circus horse is made to show its tricks by a kindly and proud ringmaster. She was led to show us her sketches and then to seat herself at the piano, there to sing to her own accompaniment. These things she did with easy grace, conveying by her manner that she was as happy to humor the harmless vanity of her parents as to amuse two guests whose taste might appreciate the performances of an amateur by no means inept at her accomplishments. She was too proud either for vanity or an aped humility, and I liked her the better for it.

Bowden, however, was not the man long to rest content with mere drawing-room amusement.

"Now, you fellows, what about a game of snooker? I think a game of snooker and a spot of whisky wouldn't do any of us any harm. Good exercise, walking round a billiard table. Many a man walks miles round his billiard table who wouldn't walk as many yards for his doctor."

"Wass is your man, Mr. Bowden," I said, knowing

myself for a rabbit with a billiard cue. "I'm not up to your form."

"That's all right. I know Wass's form. I'll tell you what. Flo and me will play Wass and you. That's a fair match. Will you come and mark, mother, or will you stay down here?"

"I'll stay here with my book, Willy. You won't want me. Off you go and enjoy your game, my dears, I'll be quite happy with my book."

So off, perforce, we had to go. "The Hollies" had the finest private billiard-room in Headley, its proud owner informed us. The boast was probably well justified, for at the back of the house a large room had been built out and most luxuriously equipped for the game which all true men of the world played well before motor-cars came to draw them away from indoor amusements.

Florence took a cue from its case and chalked the tip with the casual air of a professional, watching her father and Peter as they laid out the snooker balls, and herself raising the wooden triangle when the balls were duly "set."

Peter spun a coin and dexterously caught it.

"Right," said Bowden, struggling out of his coat, "You brast off, I'll follow you, and Flo 'll follow Peyton. Coats off, lads. This is going to be a serious business."

It was a serious business. The only one of the four who did not appear to take it seriously was my inept self. But I made a fair showing and did nothing very tragical in the way of presenting points to our opponents. There was a merry struggle for the last red and a fierce fight for both the pink and the black at the end of the game. The pink left whichever of us scored the black the winners by two or three points. Peter played for safety, and left it tucked under the top cushion, from whence our host sent it cavorting into the angle of the pocket. For the first time he ceased to jockey us with chaff.

"Now, Dogsboddy," said Peter, using my absurd nick-

name in his excitement, "be careful, be careful. Don't follow through it."

I was careful, so careful that I left the two balls ogling each other across the pocket-mouth. Florence, chalking her cue, walked to the top of the table and stood over them. Her father, dancing like a performing elephant by her side, interrogated her in a roar.

"Can you cut it, lass, can you cut it?"

The lass shook her ringleted head, doubtfully.

"No," she said, "I can't cut it."

"Then do nothing, do nothing. Just skim it," her partner commanded her.

"Look here, Papa. I'm not the sort to 'do nothing. I'm going to have a shot at doubling it into the middle sack."

He raised at this a roar of great anguish. Had she suggested having a shot at, and doubling, him, his pain could not have been more genuine.

"You'll go down, you'll go down!"

"Not I," she assured him, coolly. "Now watch this."

We did watch, while she stretched her lithe length along the side of the table, took the measure of her stroke, and with an almost vicious lunge launched her shot. The white came curling back, flirting with the rim of the top pocket as it passed, and the black, rebounding from the cushion, went with speed and dispatch to its appointed bourne.

"Game to us," said Florence.

"Well-I'll-go-to-seal!" said her father, grounding his cue heavily.

Peter whistled.

"Got a professional in the family, Bowden," he remarked, returning his own cue to the rack.

"Professional? Blooming miracle-worker." He put an appreciative arm round his daughter's slim waist. She endured his caress.

As we returned our cues to their racks and cases I may

veled again at her perfect command of whatever event confronted her. Peter and Mr. Bowden began to gather the snooker set together.

"What about a fifty up, Wass?" asked our host.

"I don't mind."

"Come on then. Put these things in the locker while I get out the ivories."

"I don't think we want to watch a fifty up, do we?" asked Florence. "Come along, and I'll show you our extensive grounds."

The billiard room, I noticed for the first time, had a small door let into its further wall. Through this she led me.

"Be careful," she warned, "there are five steps down. It is a breakneck arrangement, but they wanted the room well off the ground level, coz of the table. Are you down?"

"Safely down," I reported.

The house had more garden at the back than I should have suspected from its size. We were standing in a flagged yard beyond which, running between high brick walls, a lawn stretched a narrow length towards a block of buildings which I guessed to be stables and outhouses.

It was a warm April night, not quite free from the threat of rain. The moon seemed to be racing across the somber blue as banks of clouds drove across its face, leaving the earth to make what it might of the alternating robes of light and dark that clothed it. There, in that narrow town garden, the few trees loomed large and distances were exaggerated in the deceptive shadow and shine.

Florence and I walked slowly across the carefully tended lawn towards a rustic summer-house which marked its mid-point. There we stayed. The shelter had been so placed that its doorway looked across and not up or down the garden, so that anyone within could command by a turn of the head either approach, but none approaching could command its interior. It was invitingly

dark, and without any word being spoken we entered and sat together on the little form which spanned its octagonal walls.

"I've known you for a very long time, Mr. Peyton," she surprisingly informed me after a moment's silence, in which I was again ravished by her nearness and enchanted by the subtle perfume which she used. I might have been an unsophisticated boy in my early teens.

"You have known me . . . ?"

"Almost ever since you first came to Headley."

"But surely . . . !"

"No. I've known you, but you haven't known me. I used to go to the Headley High School when I was a child. I was still there when I first saw you. You were the clever young man from the *Chronicle*."

There was just light enough for me to see her face, to catch her smile as her eyes rested on me.

"We used to make up romances about you. Aren't you flattered?"

"I'm more than a little amused."

"Yes. And then you began to make up romances about yourself."

"You mean . . . ?"

"There was that fair-haired little art teacher. Rather a striking girl in her way. You were always about with her. You and Mr. Wass. We wondered which of you was the one, or if . . ."

She broke off suddenly.

"Then I went to Belgium. I still saw you in the vacations. Mother and I used to pass you sometimes as we drove out, and once, very thrillingly, I sat at the next table in a tea room. You had become the clever young man with a vengeance by then. Papa used to speak of you as a 'coming light.' I suppose you are a 'coming light,' aren't you?"

"It is nice of you to think so."

"Oh, I do think so. Even I haven't lost the sense of

glamor that attaches to rising young authors who are also promising young politicians. But I've never thought of you as a rising young anything. I have always thought of you as you. The staggering thing is to find you so young?"

"Am I so young?"

"When I was fifteen you were twenty-five. You might have been fifty-five for all I knew. One doesn't estimate gaps of age at that time of life. One is only conscious that they are not to be bridged. I have always thought of you until to-night as one of father's generation."

"I hope I haven't too shockingly disappointed you!" I ventured.

"No. You haven't done that. How could you? It's all been very strange and delightful, finding you so young and—and—and chummy. You know, Mr. Peyton, one doesn't meet many men in a town like this to whom one can talk in any reasonable way."

"No. I suppose not. Or many girls, for that matter. I suppose that's why you have gone away so much."

"Yes. But it's different with girls. You don't want to talk to girls, you men. You just want to—to flirt with them, to say pretty things and hear pretty things. I expect you've made a string of conquests since I used to envy the pretty art teacher, all those years ago."

"No. I haven't made any conquests. Not of women."

"Oh, no. I'd forgotten. You've been busy playing Napoleon, haven't you! Have you enjoyed it?"

"Tremendously. But I might have enjoyed it more if . . ."

"If what . . .?" she urged, frankly eager.

"If I'd known you earlier," I said on the impulse, since I could not, to her of all people, complete, as it was meant to be completed, the sentence I had incautiously started. At this reply she gave a little sigh of relief, as if some doubt had been resolved for her. Her next question came abruptly.

"You don't think me forward, do you, sitting here alone with you?"

"No. I think you very gracious."

"You have a courtly tongue."

"Have I? I only know it has been badly tied all evening."

"Yes. I have heard you addressing meetings with eloquence, but I should never have thought it, had I only been able to judge you by your conversation to-night. I wonder why. It is because we are not your kind of people, isn't it?"

"Why, what kind of cad do you think I am?"

She laid a protesting hand on my arm.

"I didn't mean that. You know I didn't. I don't think you are any kind of a cad, or a snob either. But I thought you didn't quite know what to talk to us about. I thought . . ."

I took the hand from my sleeve and held it.

"If I was tongue-tied to-night, it was because I was bewitched. You can't know your loveliness if you think a man could sit by your side and be unaffected. Why—you are, you are . . ."

She was facing me squarely now. Her glance in the dark of the little summer-house was provocative, for her challenging face was very close to my own.

"I am what?"

I put my arms around her and crushed her to me. For a moment she resisted and held me off, but only for a moment. Then, with indescribable passion, she surrendered herself to an embrace of primitive abandon. My long repressions and her unsatisfied longings fanned in us a sudden flame of ardent desire. Even when I had sated myself on her hot lips I buried my mouth in the warmth of her bare shoulder and held her, held her as if I had never known restraints, or never before been made free of a woman's kiss. And she—she lay still in my grasp, save when her quickened breath stirred her to waves

of tumescent response. There was no time for us. We were together in some eternity of fulfilment.

And then, abruptly, she put me away from her, and her hands busied themselves with her shaken ringlets and her crushed bodice.

"I didn't know, I didn't know . . ." she said.

"You didn't know what? That you would make a man mad?"

"I didn't know that I could make you mad. But you weren't mad, were you? Only——"

"Yes?"

"Only playing at being mad. If you'd been really mad, you'd have . . ."

"Yes?"

She rose to her feet and stood over me.

"Oh, Frank Peyton, what a boy you are, for all your great doings!"

I didn't like that, and yet, somehow, as I, too, rose, and stood close to her, I felt a boy. I snatched her two hands and gripped them brutally enough.

"What do you want? What do you want?" I charged her.

"I want you to come in before Mr. Wass and my father finish their game."

"Florence!"

I resented being called a boy. Particularly did I resent being called a boy by this enflaming deity. I felt that she laughed at me now, however passionate had been her surrender to my embrace a few minutes before. I could find no solution to my immediate problem of how I really felt towards her. I solved it by gathering her again into my arms and smothering her throat and breast with my kisses.

§ 2

We were back in the flamboyant drawing-room sedately facing each other from two chairs with a placidly slum-

bering Mrs. Bowden between us before Peter and Bowden came from the billiard room.

"Hello, you're very quiet—oh, I see—it's the old having her nap, is it? Now, mother, wake up, v up."

Thus exhorted, Mrs. Bowden did wake up, with ineffectual attempt to grab a falling book that had fa at the beginning of her long doze. I felt guilty ashamed, feeling that I had outraged this worthy m hospitality by hugging and kissing his daughter while entertained my fellow guest and her mother slept. I c ported myself normally enough, I cannot doubt, b was heartily glad when our cab arrived and Peter a were struggling into our coats and thanking the Bowc for their hospitality. They crowded into the hall to their good-nights and old Bowden walked down the p with Peter; Florence and I walking a pace or two bef them.

"Write to me, Frank," she thrillingly whispered.

"Yes, I'll write. But—" We were on the heels of others, and the sentence stayed unfinished.

"Well, Dogsbody, that's over," said Peter as the cr old cab rumbled away with us. "Good-hearted old bui Good-hearted pair, in fact. But I say, Dogsbody, wha man-hungry girl—and what a beauty!"

But I was too intent upon my own thought to expos late or agree with him, wondering whether fate had tal Joan because Florence awaited me and whether I co contrive an excuse to see Florence on the morrow. I was not, I perceived, the only one who starved.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

§ 1

THERE WAS little difficulty in contriving my pretext for seeing Florence on the morrow. There were many and urgent reasons, I found for the first time in my experience, why the editor of the local paper should confer with the chairman of the local party. I was not altogether sorry to find that when I reached the house the following afternoon the chairman of the local party was not at home. I doffed, with suspicious alacrity, the inward pretense which was to have been my excuse and asked for Mrs. Bowden. She was, said the maid, taking her nap. There was a mischievous gleam in the girl's eyes, something not quite derisory, but not wholly sympathetic. Before I could turn away she informed me that Miss Florence was at home if I cared . . . I cared very much, and within the minute was sitting again in the ornate drawing-room balancing my hat on my knees and wondering how I should greet my partner in last night's unbelievable intoxication. I projected openings, and surveyed possible sentences of salutation. I was made pleasantly aware that I had a heart that hammered, surprisingly, at the base of my throat. Also, I discovered, my hands were unreasonably unsteady.

The door opened and my uncertainty was composed. There was no hesitation about our greeting. She came across the room to me and I rose and stepped to meet her. With no word spoken we were in each other's arms, her eager, frank kiss assuring me that the mood of the previous night had been no momentary madness.

We drew away from each other abruptly, glancing towards the closed door as if we had been engaged in some terribly guilty encounter. I felt all the sensations

of a perjured adulterer with all the swelling triumph of a greater Casanova.

Then, by some feminine inspiration, she caught the absurdity of our new relationship, and laughed, giving me both her hands. So we stood—she laughing and I drinking in, without a smile, the wonder and stimulation of her, our hands joined and our eyes held in a spiritual coition which would have cast for Schopenhauer the horoscopes we were to live out together.

"I knew you'd come," she said, "I've been willing you back to me. Aren't you frightened of me? 'I am able yet, all I want, to get by a method as strange as new. . . .' That's Browning. Aren't you flattered that I quote Browning to you? What nonsense you make me talk. Do you like me, Frank?"

"Like you!"

I drew her towards me, to enfold her again, but she resisted me with something between a sigh and a mock moan.

"No. Sit down, and let us be sensible, my dear."

Her effect upon me was more potent than I would ever have believed possible. When I was a boy some women had inflamed my adolescent imagination to a fever heat, and Joan had stirred me to a warm glow of love and desire that had seemed the very perfection of passionate aspiration, but this vibrant and urgent goddess conjured me into a mood of all-consuming concupiscence. I understood for the first time with any real comprehension what was meant by the world well lost for love. To be with her was a benison, to touch her was to be exalted to a primal unity with all well-being, to possess her and to be possessed by her would be to find once and forever the great secret, to attain to that ecstasy for which all else in life is either preparation or penance.

Such was the state into which her mere gracious presence reduced or exalted me. I neither excuse nor explain it. I only know—I only knew—that it was so with me,

that she dismissed into some category of idle futilities the restrained and quieter self who had so far lived my life and that she called into domination within me some more primitive and virile faun who seemed, under her spell, to be the real self for whom the normal me had been but a patient deputy. I was mad, drunk, infatuate—what you will! But I was enraptured and fulfilled, as nothing else had ever enraptured and fulfilled me. The careful work for my paper, the aspirations of my career, the hopes of fame and the dreams of material attainment fell away to insignificances. They seemed the playthings of an unawakened boy. And Joan and her love only remained in my consciousness because the ineptitude of our wooing seemed so amiable a contrast by which to measure the greatness of the passion which now consumed me.

And, what was more odd, under the influence of this infatuate mood all others than we grew in my mind not less but more grotesque and lovable. I had always seen men and women as creations at once comic and pathetic, rather than as tragical and sad, or drab and unmoving, but now I saw them as a world of Shakespearean clowns made only to fill a background against which Oberon and Titania could the better savor their unique estate and display their divine detachment from all mundane significances.

I can formulate now the emotions which beset me, but even then I was dimly aware of them. In every man there is a watcher, a not always silent censor of his ways, whose rôle is passive, and whose participation in the activities of the whole man is but that of a spectator. Of the watcher within myself I was quite conscious that day with Florence. He stood aside from me, a sympathetic but slightly contemptuous commentator upon my antics. Had he disentangled himself from my physical being and seated himself, like a *doppelgänger* of the old legends, in a chair facing my own, I could not have found him more real. But his cooler judgment served only to spur me on

to some ultimate encounter with the new forces which had been released about me by the eager appeal of the lovely and hungry creature upon whom I feasted my eyes.

And this, this medley of moods, this whirlpool of lusts and affections, of desires and released inhibitions, held us both in that absurd room, with its gilt adornments and its staring yellow plush, its busts of the good queen and her repressive consort, its languishing Moorish girl in cheap plaster and its massed photographs of staid and conventional nonentities. I was an ill educated and pretentious journalistic hack in love with the daughter of a wholesale clothier, and because circumstances had immured me from free contact with life, and cheated her of the real release which her whole feminine being demanded, we tasted the passion of the gods. It did not matter that the chalice which held the uplifting draught was passed to our lips under the roof of an ugly, ill-built house with a broken bell and rickety gates and nothing of grace or beauty about it.

§ 2

"... let us be sensible, my dear!" she said that first afternoon, and her eyes belied her words. So was it with us in the days that followed. Joan had been the inspiration in the background, but Florence was the distraction which drove everything else into a diminished perspective. Fortunately for me the financial and business skill of George Lawton had placed me in such a position in affairs that any neglect of what had once been my active duties and primary preoccupation now mattered little or nothing. Florence obsessed me—Florence and my need of her. There were hours when I railed at myself for my folly, and told myself that the thing would pass, and that I should return again to my cool and ordered life. But the madness did not abate. Appetite grew by what it fed upon. I flung to the winds the instinctive caution of the young man, and courted by conventional

ways the girl who had needed no winning, so that I might be the more in her presence. It was better to sit, however coldly, with her in a room full of fatuously patronizing elders than to walk the streets thinking of her.

Ardent as she was, there was that in us both, some heritage of generations of sober folk or some final fear, which prevented her from making the final surrender. We lured passion to its most compelling insistence, and then forwent its culmination. This very tantalization, deliberate as it was, fed the flames within us.

I was no unsophisticate. I knew that the aim of the unattached predatory girl was always marriage, and this girl was, in all consciousness, predatory. I knew, too, the wiles by which the aim was reached, the too quick surrender to compel loyalty or the deferred abandonment to tempt from the lover a ring as the price of his beatitude. But never for a moment did I credit Florence with such a motive. She was too honest a lover herself to have ulterior motives when she slaked her erotic thirst.

In the guarded hours we would talk with the calm detachment of friends. She displayed an unexpected acquaintance with books and affairs. Her habit of flinging to me a line of some favorite poet, I found, was no pose, or no mere reminiscence of her schooling, nor was there anything of affectation in her interest in the surface politics of that day. Some phases of life meant nothing to her. She sketched with a kind of half-trained facility, but she had no understanding of art. She played the piano and sang, but music meant nothing to her beyond an accomplishment which helped to grace the more idle hours of her day. But to those things which had attracted her capricious temperament she brought a zest and an application which could be frightening in its intensity. And I found, with some amazement, that she was inordinately proud of her prowess as a billiards player. She did not speak of it, but in the billiards room her sense of realized mastery transformed her. I have since known masters of

music and painting and acting display precisely that sense of satisfied assurance. It aroused in me a feeling of jealous impatience. I enjoyed the favors of a goddess, and was jealous of a billiard table.

§ 3

By all the canons of conventionality and the current fiction of that time I should have proposed marriage, but there was no such definite moment in my relationship with Florence Bowden. It seemed to be assumed between us from the first that we were to marry, and it was so assumed by her family. There was a stage when she and her friends pretended together that there was no understanding between us, but the pretense was merely a sop to usage. My advent into her circle meant for them, and, indeed, for me, that I was affianced even though no formal declaration had been made. I doubt if I should ever have thought of buying the engagement ring which custom demanded had it not been for another turn in my personal fortunes which was to change, for the last time, the current of my working life. It was enough for her and for me that we moved together from amusement to amusement, distraction to distraction, accepted by others as lovers, in the innocent and English sense, and as such provided with special facilities for solitude and intercourse.

We went together to "at homes." I suppose that never again in our national history will such functions ever recur as part of the social round. They were ordeals by uncertainty, those middle-class "at home days" of the late nineties and the early nineteen-hundreds. From whichever aspect one viewed them, that of the receiver or that of the caller, they were the most melancholy of festivals. One day in each month saw the household plunged into a feverish activity. Rooms already that week "turned out" were given a secondary cleaning. A provi-

sion of small cakes and thin sandwiches, of table flowers and weak tea, was the material preparation. Secure in the knowledge that the fortress was well stocked, the hostess and her daughters sat clad in fine raiment awaiting the assault. Sometimes many came, sometimes few came, and sometimes none came. Sometimes the arrivals began early and sometimes they began late. If they began early, the afternoon was a long and anxious strain of futile and difficult conversational gymnastics, consisting wholly of the most simple and elementary exercises of the faculty of speech. If they began late, there was the extra strain of making a sudden recovery from the jangled nerves which had created a temporary relationship of mutual bickering, so that the first caller might be confronted with smiling and gracious welcomes.

There were very few men at any of the "at homes" to which I went with Florence or at the receptions over which she and her mother presided. The majority of the coteries which circled from "at home" to "at home" were middle-aged women and eligible daughters, with a sprinkling of young brides and an occasional aged grand-mamma. Sometimes a suitor of my own ambiguous standing was there, sometimes a clergyman, and now and again an unexpected male who usually discovered himself as the successful son or brother home on a visit from London or Timbuctoo or wherever he had found his personal fortune. The rigid rule appeared to be that no mention was made of any real interest shared by those present. I gathered from Florence that when we, the censorious sex, were not represented, these functions resolved themselves into gossip-bees, each departing caller furnishing the topic for the remainder until only one visitor and the hostesses were left to resurvey the whole ground over which the talk had wandered. Twenty minutes was supposed to be the limit of a call, but it was as often as not exceeded, since departure meant not only that oneself was transformed into the subject of scandal but that one

was robbed of the opportunity of scandalizing the departed.

There was no zest or enjoyment about these functions. They were a weariness and a boredom. No one was certain as to what might safely be said. No one was sure of what might or might not be the correct etiquette for such social encounters, and so each donned an artificial manner, either unduly frigid or absurdly gushing. No one was at ease.

I remember arriving one "third Friday" at the house of a Mrs. Benyon. I had known Mr. Benyon for some years. He was a blunt man with an ineradicable habit of using the adjectives of the towing-path as if they were the essential qualifications of all English substantives. He had some kind of importing agency in the town, and I had occasionally been in the Club with George Lawton when Benyon had lunched over to do a deal. He never offered his goods. He announced them.

"I can put you in twenty bloody gross at ten-and-blazing-six, if you want the blasted stuff, you old homosexualist," is a gentle paraphrase of the kind of approach he made to his customers. Whether he had some more formal manner with buyers to whom he was not known I never discovered, or whether there was any hour of the day at which he was not already half-drunk, drunk, or completely saturated I cannot tell. But his manner, his habits, and his general personality seemed to imply that his home was probably a littered garret over his own warehouse or a frousty bedroom in some favorite public house.

The implication was grotesquely false. His home, as I discovered when I played escort to Florence that "third Friday," was the usual double-fronted villa of red brick with its decent stretch of front garden kept in trim by the jobbing craftsman who, apparently, tended every other garden in the road, and soared no higher in his conceptions of horticulture than the idea that a square

of mown grass with three flanking flower beds and a center plot of daffodils or pinks was, if not perfection, at least a presentation of the true personality of any honest son of Adam.

The drawing-room of Mrs. Benyon might have been the drawing-room of Mrs. Bowden, except that here the furniture was in red and not yellow plush and one suspected that upon close examination the family photographs would reveal some minor differences of physiognomy, since they revealed none of technique. There was even a replica of the plaster Moor and his plaster partner with her shoulder water-jug. The pictures looked as if Benyon had, in a moment of weakness, accepted his own offer to put in twenty bloody gross at ten-and-blazing-six.

There was a special ceremony of announcing. A maid, who must have known Florence as well as she knew her own mistress, formally requested our names, led us to a closed door, paused for a moment to summon back her own flustered breath, and then, as if about to disclose the horrors of Bluebeard's closet, slowly opened the door. In a sudden and startled whisper she breathed out the names we had given to her, and was in such haste to return to her post of duty in the hall that she closed the door on my left heel. I advanced behind Florence to where Mrs. Benyon waited to receive us. With my hostess I shook hands and to her two daughters I bowed dumbly. Then I seated myself gingerly upon a red plush chair played with my hat and stick, dropped and recovered my gloves, saw Florence captured by the two Benyon girls, and found myself forced into duet with their mother.

Mrs. Benyon opined that it was very 'ot. I agreed cordially, but suggested that it was not unpleasant. She admitted that she liked the 'eat.

"Now my Phil—Mr. Benyon, that is—can't stand 'eat. It makes 'im 'ot."

"Really?" I said, with a lift to my eyebrows, at such

an astonishing result, which would have done no discredit to a popular actor manager conveying perturbation and surprise.

"You know my Phil, don't you? Often speaks of you. He's likely to find the 'eat trying, being a man of full 'abit, *and* a northerner."

I suggested, brilliantly, that she was not herself a native of the North.

"Wot! Me? A northerner? Not me, Mr. Peyton. I'm from Brighton."

"Not really!" There was no reason why the good lady should not be from Brighton, but this seemed at the moment the right comment.

"Yes. From Brighton. I met my Phil when he used to come traveling, before he started 'is own agency. Behind the bar, I was, in those days, and not ashamed of it, even if we have got well-to-do. 'E likes you, my Phil does. Good judge of men, too."

I thanked her for the compliment.

"Bless you, Mr. Peyton, I didn't mean it as a compliment, I was only just telling you. It isn't everybody in Headley that 'e likes. I suppose you're going to marry Flo Bowden? She's just the wife for you, you know."

My discomfort at this direct attack was acute, but the amiable lady went on heedlessly.

"Eddicated and well brought up, she is. Old Bill Bowden has done 'is duty by his children. So 'ave we for the matter of that. That boy's a bit of a tartar, though, isn't he?"

I had not met my prospective brother-in-law, I told her.

"Oh, no. No more you will 'ave done. 'E 's bin away on the continent, 'asn't 'e? Well, 'e's a rum un, I give you my word."

The door was guiltily opened, and the maid's whisper in a tone of extreme fear announced Mrs. Henniker, Miss Henniker and Captain Jowl.

The homely, friendly Mrs. Benyon disappeared, and in her place sat a stiff and simpering matron at whose side two equally prim daughters were in close support. Hardly had the newcomers greeted their hostess and smiled at us than the maid again peeped into Bluebeard's closet, breathed out two more names, and fearfully closed the door, to reopen it a few seconds later with a whisper that was by now almost inaudible and entirely unintelligible. Within a few minutes we were a room full. Mrs. Benyon was a happy woman. No other "at home," one guessed from her bearing, had so far this season reached such a pitch of congestion.

Another maid entered with the tea, and the Misses Benyon took post, like vedettes, at a side table. Captain Jowl and I escaped the chatter of our immediate neighbors and began to hand round the sandwiches and little cakes. The maid and the Benyon girls would not trust to our rash male fingers cups of tea which might ruin at any mischance the startling carpet beneath our feet.

Our masculine duty done, the Captain and I retired together into a window recess, there to sip from cups of our own. For the first time I had a good look at him and he at me.

"Deuced hot!" he said.

"Very."

He was evidently one of the returned exiles, for this setting, for all his assumption of ease, did not seem in any way familiar to him. He stood wiping the cavalry mustache which was still the fashion for young men in those times and weighing with shrewd eyes my own relationship to the animated scene from which we had a little withdrawn. He decided to be bold with me.

"Not your sort, these people, what?" he ventured.

"Nor yours," I retaliated.

"Good Lord, no. My cousin brought me. Jenny Heniker. Know her?"

"Slightly."

"She's told me about you. Just now. Engaged to Miss Watshername, with the ringlets, aren't you?"

We were speaking in conspiratorial whispers, but the chatter of the women would have drowned a normal interchange between us. It was, I fancy, to increase the sense of comradeship in a strange land that we sank our voices.

"Not quite engaged," I told him.

"I see. Like me and Jenny."

Ah! Another bond. We warmed to each other.

"Jenny says about you—coming light—and all that sort of thing—what?"

"She's evidently been very flattering."

"Dam' rot. Not her kind. Don't flatter. Only told me. Bit of a nib myself. In my own line. Polo, you know."

"Polo?"

"Well, polo and mounted reconnaissance."

It occurred to me, even then and in those surroundings, how absurd was this professional reluctance to admit any real interest in one's job. I saw clearly the kind of man my interlocutor would be once he had shed his fashionable affectation of stupidity and clipped speech.

"Jenny says you and Miss Watshername will jolly things about, once you're married."

"Jolly things about?"

"Stir 'em up. Cut a dash. Won't paddle about in this kind of pool for long."

"I don't suppose we shall. Would you?"

"Me? Good Lord, no. Once we get out of this dam' place, Jenny an' me, never come back. Horrible hole. Hello, we're off, some of us."

Florence and two other ladies had risen and were moving towards Mrs. Benyon, with exclamations of delight and gratitude which would have been slightly excessive after a banquet of Petronius. My military friend and I came out of the window recess and performed our last duty on that crowded field. In the hall, while we waited

for the carriages to come round, I exchanged a word or two with Mrs. Henniker and her daughter. The girl had never before emerged from the general mass of Headley females as an individuality, but now I saw her for the first time, and was aware that she had already swept me into yet another conspiratorial circle. It was the Freemasonry of the betrothed. She, too, I guessed, must have known those hours of passionate encounter which had become so much and so dominating a part of my own life. It was almost incredible that this cool, almost demure maiden and this lanky and deliberately debonair soldier, in his correct civilian attire should have a private Eden of their own—but she knew what she knew. We recognized each other by our eyes and were at one.

"You must bring Florence to dinner some night," said Mrs. Henniker, "I'm afraid our wines are not what they might be since my husband died, but . . ."

"I should love to come," I said.

"Yes," said the girl, "Do come. Before Ralph rejoins. He's staying for another week. The gardens are perfectly lovely. Make him come, Flo."

"We'll certainly come, Miss Henniker," I assured her.

"Then we'll send you a card," said the mother, cementing, as it were, the bargain. They stepped into the brougham and Florence and I into the Bowden victoria.

"We're going on to the Merrivales," she told me.

I realized with a shock that I was no longer the old Frank Peyton. I had emerged from the working cells and was transmuted or degraded into a drone. It did not perturb me. I felt that I had earned a holiday. And soon I would return to my real life the stronger for this unauthorized interlude.

It was nearly five o'clock when we reached the home of Sir John Merrivale, of Merrivale's Ales and Stouts. In Prosperity Street, I remembered, Mrs. Gallus would be busy making patty cakes. I felt suddenly and inex-

plicably that I had somehow lost my way, that I was here under false pretenses, that I had no part or lot with these joyless ghouls to whom life was not an adventure but a stupid ritual devoid of all esoteric significance, an affair of idle meetings and unreal relationships. Nobody in the Merrivale drawing-room wanted to see us, and we wanted to see none of them, yet here we were, solemnly following a flunky to a Barmecide feast of little cakes and futile talk. But I remembered that when we left this house the summer dusk would already have fallen and Florence and I would drive home together by some devious route. As I bowed over the too heavily be-ringed hand of Lady Merrivale I was aware that behind the ostensible stupidity of these social functions there was, after all, a use and a purpose.

The Henniker brougham had outdriven our victoria, and as Florence and I moved past our hostess the understanding eyes of Jenny Henniker mutely summoned us to a corner of the room where four young people could evade the duty of making polite conversation.

"Are you going on to the Walmsleys?" asked Florence.

"No," said Jenny, "Mother's going on with old Mrs. Watkins. Ralph and I are taking the brougham home."

I wondered if it were really essential for me to go down to the office for the editorial conference.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

§ I

THE CHANGE in my fortunes which transformed the "understanding" into a formal engagement had been long projected, but it came, as these things will, with a spurious air of the unexpected.

My infatuation for Florence, much as it drew me from my accustomed occupations and from my own restricted

circle of friends and acquaintances, did not by any means withdraw me from my intense preoccupation with both politics and journalism. My new relationship with old William Bowden, indeed, impelled me to give even more time to the affairs of the local party organization, the President of which, as you know, was the old Duke of Wexminster.

The constituency in which Wexminster Towers was situated was outside the jurisdiction of our party executive in Headley. It was one of the old county divisions. In his youth the Duke had held it, and it was now represented by his nephew, who was his heir presumptive, since, on the right side of the ducal blanket, he was childless. It had for some time exercised our minds that the sudden death of the old Peer would mean the availability of a safe Parliamentary seat for whoever could secure its reversion. As sound local patriots we were all anxious that the Central Office of the party in distant and arrogant London should not be allowed, in Bowden's words, to jump a Headley claim. The Wexminster Division had its own organization, but since the executive was composed entirely of farmers, small tradesmen, and three landowners, all friends or creatures of the Duke, the ducal advice or wish would be followed. If young Clement Marvin—a ripe legislator of fifty-two, but always “young” until his uncle should die—was allowed to fall into the hands of the London people no man could tell what manner of candidate would be foisted upon the division. There was no lack in our own midst of men ready to contest the division and pay heavily for the privilege. Sir John Merrivale and Sir Walter Mason, two of our local magnates, had both implied that an invitation to succeed young Clement Marvin would not be rejected. Even Bowden was not free from a suspicion of desiring at least a refusal of the succession.

There had been a time when I had imagined that such things as safe constituencies went to honest merit and

patent ability, and that office was given by tests of fitness. I let no such ingenuous illusion hamper me when with the first approach of Autumn the old Duke was reported indisposed with bronchitis. It might be the seasonal attack which had beset him for so many years, or it might be the beginning of something more serious. At seventy years of age a man is not invulnerable. So ran my quite callous thought. I wrote a note of sympathy to the Duke himself and a friendly letter to Clement Marvin, the avowed occasion of which was that I desired his acceptance to my new volume of essays, but the real purpose of which was both to remind him of my political existence and to discuss local party affairs. These mis-sives being safely dispatched, I took counsel with George.

My hero-as-business-man since the day when he first obtruded himself upon me had become a hero-as-family-man. I did not raise my problem at the office but looked in at his surprisingly modest and sedate house after I had dined at the Club with Peter Wass, whose advice I had also cautiously taken. The one thing which I had not yet mentioned to Peter, nor he to me, was my friendship with Florence Bowden. I knew that he knew of our attachment and he knew that I knew, but there was a tacit understanding that we should ignore it. None the less I felt a new constraint between us, and even my appeal for advice as to the Wexminster division had not quite brought to my aid the old Sinbad of Prosperity Street. He was, in his heart, I felt, accusing me of treachery to Joan. It was an accusation from which I always cowardly fled, neither reasoning out my own feeling nor facing that which I was convinced animated Peter.

But George and Agatha received me with such unchanged fervor that Peter's dumb arraignment of me was promptly forgotten.

Yes. I had dined. I would like a whisky and soda. Yes—most certainly I would go up and see the children. Thus I made my responses to the litany of welcome.

As I stood by the bedside of my godson—Frank Peyton Lawton for his sins—I looked over to his mother, who was gazing down at her small son with all the Madonnas of all the galleries in her warm maternal eyes.

"Well, Agatha, does this make you feel real?" I asked.

"Make me feel real? Why, what do you mean?"

"Nothing. Or, at least, I meant, you seem so wonderfully happy, so divinely contented."

"I am—divinely contented. Do you think he's grown?"

"Who, this rascal? Of course he's grown. And so has Joan. And so has Peter. I suppose you'll call the next one Garrick after Mr. Gallus."

I swear that she blushed a little, so lightly had maternity touched her real bashful self.

"If we do have another boy," she told me, "I mean to call him Nat, after old Nat Grim."

"You're a loyal soul, Agatha."

"Yes. I've had good reason to be loyal, haven't I?"

"Are you and George still reading self-educators?"

She shook her head with a quaint smile.

"Not now. But they did us a lot of good, you know. I'm not ashamed of having read them."

"Why should you be? I say, Agatha?"

"Yes?"

She had her hand on the key of the gas bracket, but turned at my word.

"I suppose you have never heard anything of Joan?"

"Of Miss Agnew? Why should I have heard if you haven't? You don't think . . ."

"No. I only thought that, perhaps, she might have . . . Oh, not really, I suppose. But I *thought*, I thought that perhaps you might have heard of or from her. She was so very fond of you, you know, Agatha. Let's go down."

§ 2

George flung himself very heartily into my project for securing the reversion of Marvin's seat.

"It'd be a darn good thing all round. You'd have to throw up the editorship, but you'd hang on to your founder's share and your holding, and once in the House you could do us no end of good. You're rich enough for the game at all events. . . ."

"Yes, thanks to you, George."

"Why thanks to me! Funny, wasn't it, how I used to be so sure of my coo? Do you ever think of that day when we drove out to—oh, sorry, I'd forgotten. It wasn't a very good day for you, Frank, in some ways, was it? But it *was* a coup when it came. I wonder what old Merry makes of his old property now when he reads our annual reports? That's what made you rich, Frank, old Merry liking you sufficiently to give us that option. Gad! What a near squeak it was. If that hadn't come off I suppose we'd both be still drawing about five pounds a week and calling it success. But about Wexminster. Why not make both ends sure, and let the London people suggest you as well?"

"I'm afraid the London people will want the seat for some more imposing or awkward person."

"There couldn't be a more awkward person. Dammit, Frank, think how nasty you could be with the paper."

"Hardly, George."

"I didn't say you would be. I said you could be. They won't know what kind of a tender-minded cove you are. In any case, there'd be no harm in pulling the wires."

"No harm at all. But how to pull them is the question."

"You leave that to me. I'll pull 'em for you. You don't think I go to London six or eight times a month without knowing people! Before the end of this week they'll be convinced that you're the only man for the seat. In the meantime you cotton on to Marvin."

Agatha came in with a laden tray.

"I say, Agatha, I've had dinner, I really have," I protested.

"So have we," said her husband, "but you must have something with us. Agatha, he's going to leave Headley and live in London."

"You're not! When?"

"After the next election," said George.

"Oh, that. I thought you were serious. Headley wouldn't be Headley without Mr. Peyton."

I had long given up hope of teaching Agatha to call me by any less formal name.

"You'd never miss me after the first week," I told her.

"Wouldn't we! And yet, it is funny how life goes on. There's always something or somebody. But everybody's said that you'd be going into Parliament. . . ."

"Before you actually get into the House, Frank, there is one thing we must do."

"And that is, George?"

"A partnership."

"A partnership? But aren't we already . . .?"

"I mean apart from the papers. If you are going to Parliament you'll pick up a lot of information that might be very useful quite apart from the newspapers. Now, if you don't mind my saying it, you're not what I call an ipso facto business man. But if you and I worked together we could do wonders."

"Information? Would that be straight, George, making use of information in order to . . ."

"My dear chap, of course it would, the kind of information I mean. You see, you'll find out what people are doing and so on. Now suppose, for example, you are approached to go on to the board of some projected company. They are always keen to get an M. P. amongst 'em. Well, a company that is being formed has a lot of work that someone must do. There are prospectuses to be drawn up and printed and so on. If we had a small company ready to undertake that kind of work. . . . Do you see what I'm driving at?"

"Yes, but I'm not going into Parliament, if I get there,

to make money out of it. I'm going for other reasons."

"Yes. I know all about that. I know the bees in your bonnet all right after all these years. But it would be foolish to leave money lying about for others to pick up when we could have it without much effort, and quite honestly. You've no idea what big money there is waiting to be picked up. Why, dash it, we might found a big commercial house before we die."

I could see that he was about to mount one of his favorite hobby horses.

"Hold hard, George. We've founded a successful evening paper and one or two other things. Isn't that enough for you?"

"No. Nor is it for you. You want to be a statesman. Well, I want to be commercial king. What's the difference? All you'd have to do would be to let me know anything that seemed to promise business. I'd do the rest. Suppose you met a man in the House and said to him, 'Sir Algernon, you look worried,' and he said, 'Yes, I'm thinking of selling my country place,' or it might be his stud or his yacht. You'd tell me, and I'd get into touch with him and offer to buy whatever it was he was selling, and then find a purchaser. That's what I call business. Nothing wrong about that, Frank, surely?"

"No. Nothing wrong, but it seems a bit underhand to me. I mean, my side of it would, making profit out of people's confidences."

"Look here, Frank, suppose a man told you that he was going to sell his country place, would you as an editor scruple to make a news 'par' out of it?"

"No. But that would be different. And, besides, the man would probably be glad to have it known."

"Damn it, wouldn't he be glad to have a buyer ready to his hand?"

So this, to men like George Lawton, was the noble institution of Parliament—the House of Commons where sharp men picked up useful information, and the House

of Lords a reward for commercial acumen. I had a sudden distaste for the whole business of politics.

"Well, let us wait until we see if Wexminster division will adopt me."

"There'll be no question of that. Wexminster will have to do as we tell it. You get hold of Marvin and I'll get hold of Central Office."

He took another sandwich from Agatha's laden tray and waved it at me with an oddly boyish grin on his face.

"You just tell me what you want, Frank, and I'll get it for you, any time, anywhere. We'll make you Prime Minister yet, between us. This is the age of democracy." He bit deep into his sandwich, and added, with his mouth full, "democracy and big business. You'll see."

§ 3

With Clement Marvin my tactics were bold. I made upon him a direct frontal attack. We met in the Central Hotel as he broke his journey from the capital to Wexminster, the meeting being by good fortune timed for an hour adaptable to dinner. Clement Marvin was not unlike his uncle, save that he wore no beard and under his drooping mustache the slack mouth and the obstinate chin of the family seemed accentuated in proportion to the other features of a face not without its fine points.

"I follow you, Peyton," he said, when I had explained my point of view as to the situation in the Wexminster division. "You think my uncle may die suddenly."

"No. But there is always that chance. I wouldn't like the seat to go to a complete outsider. Still less would I like it to fall to one of these new Headley men."

"No. You are quite right about that. Terrible fellas some of them. We don't want any cads at Wexminster. And you'd like it?"

"Of course. Who wouldn't?"

"I must say you've done a deuce of a lot for the party

this last few years. It's not a cheap constituency, you know."

He was ingenuously appraising my monetary standing as he looked me over with his heavy eyes.

"I don't think it would break me," I said with a laugh.

"And it's agricultural."

"Meaning that I'm urban. Well, that is true. But I'm not half so urban as some probable starters."

"No, by gad! No! Well, you've been very frank about the matter. I appreciate that. And I know you, which is a recommendation. Of course, I've thought the same thing myself about my uncle. We all have. The difficulty is to see just what to do. We don't want any announcements that I won't stand again, because the dear old man would guess just what was in our minds. And besides, he may live another fifteen years. On the other hand, there ought to be a successor ready, and he ought to be given a chance to nurse the place a bit. It's not easy. Then there's my cousin. He might want a look in. He isn't too safe at West Wantage. What makes you prefer Wexminster to a Headley seat, Peyton?"

I explained some of the reasons for the choice, mainly those of local relationships.

"I follow you, Peyton," he said again, and brooded over me and the problem I presented to him. "I'll tell you what," he said at length, "if my cousin doesn't want it, I'll back you, and in the meantime we'll see how my uncle really is and we'll sound the local Committee. Is that good enough for you?"

"Quite good enough."

"You know, my uncle has always had a high opinion of you. Says you're clever and clean. It isn't often a man remains both. And I don't mind telling you that I've read your books with great pleasure. You won't want my bouquets, but there it is. And the party isn't too strong at the moment. We might have a talk with

my agent. Know him? Chap called Twillet. Odd name, but a good fella, as agents go nowadays. I'll fix a day." He was dropping out these short sentences between puffs at his cigar. I had had my conversational innings over the meal and was content to sit back and let him talk without further prompting. Then, to my surprise, he dropped still further his reserve. "By Gad, Peyton, I don't see why we should worry about my cousin. He's a bit of a rabbit at best. And you have a claim. Old John Merry tells me that you're our man of destiny. I'm a bit skeptical about men of destiny. I've seen too many of 'em come unstuck. But you ought to have your chance. Let's leave it at this. That if the Duke is as bad as we both suspect, I'll push the Committee on to you straight away."

"Of course, there is headquarters," I reminded him.

He became savage at the word.

"Headquarters! Damn headquarters. I'm sick of this caucus business. In twenty years the damned machine will be running the lot of us, every man jack of us, if we don't look to it. If you want the seat, Peyton, it's yours when I've done with it, and I'd like to see the headquarters that says otherwise."

We neither of us, I remember, considered the free and independent electors of the Wexminster division.

My maneuverings had been opportune. It was within a month of that talk that the eighth Duke of Wexminster died, and Clement Marvin succeeded to the title and estates. Before the writ had been moved I was in the middle of my first election campaign, and because Florence would not hear of being kept out of the mock fray she was displaying her engagement ring from my platforms and helping me to kiss the electoral babies.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

§ 1

MY MEMORY of that first election campaign is overlaid by the memories of many others. The whole whirl of events and incidents, policies and compromises, personalities and encounters seems incredibly remote. We are two wars and many Parliaments away from those halcyon days, when a man could really persuade himself that his own individual constructive effort was really affecting for good the destinies of his nation. Even if I cared, and strove, to bring back in all its detail the history of those days I could not relate it here, for I am concerned not with the impersonal things of my younger life, but with the more intimate and emotional occurrences. But I do still wonder that the declaration of the poll, which found me a Member of Parliament at an age younger than I had dared to reserve for that step in my ambitionist dreamings, did not impart a greater thrill, a more intense satisfaction. It came with such a savor of inevitability, and Florence somehow took from it the significance that I had always been prepared to attach to it, that it excited me much less than the letter from John Merry, years before, offering me a post on his paper.

The night the poll was declared we were all housed at Wexminster Towers, the new Duke celebrating well the return of his virtual nominee. The next day Peter Wass and I drove back to Headley together, the Bowden brougham having preceded our more humble hired fly.

"How singularly it has all fitted in," said Peter.

"Fitted in?"

"Well, worked out, if you like that better."

I was still dubious as to his exact meaning, half suspecting a concealed gibe.

"That first morning, you remember, when Jimbo and I were helping to put your room straight, and she read bits from Mill to us. You said then that you were really most intent upon statecraft and good writing. I thought you were posing a bit, but you've been consistent enough. I suppose you think it worth it, Dogsbody."

"Think what is worth what?"

"Think being a Member and the husband of the rich Miss Bowden is worth all you've lost."

"What have I lost?"

"Not your spurs, I admit. You've been very straight. But you have lost a good deal, you know."

"One can't have everything, Sinbad."

"No. One can't have everything. I suppose your Florence is very cock-a-hoop about this business?"

"She's naturally very pleased about it."

"Yes."

"Damn it, Sinbad, you speak as if she'd kidnaped me."

"Sorry. The truth is, Dogsbody, that I'm growing into a sentimental middle-aged bachelor. When you go to London I'll uproot myself, too, and go to India."

"India?"

"Yes. I'm on the track of some big work there. Even a poor architect has some changes in his life, you know. And, besides, I don't think I could stick your rotten wedding, with all that Bowden crowd."

It was not possible to take offense with old Peter, for I knew so exactly what he felt. I stayed silent in my corner of the joggling cab, watching the familiar stretch of road slip past the window. It was long before either of us spoke again. I do not know, although I guess, of what he thought, but my own mind was filled with a picture of the House of Commons and of great triumphs in that new world to which I had just been given an entrée. Florence would be a perfect hostess for the brilliant young Parliamentarian that I already felt myself to be.

My reverie was ended by Peter's lowering the window at his side and bidding the cabman to draw rein.

"Hello! What's wrong?" I asked.

"Wrong? Nothing. But you're out of your damned constituency now, and I want a drink."

We had come almost to the edge of Headley, and were standing at the door of a small inn. Peter tumbled out and I followed him.

"Good place this," he remarked, "I've often meant to tell you about it."

But I needed no telling about this place. Even as I crossed the threshold I remembered it. It was here that Joan and I had sought sanctuary from the public gaze all those years ago. My nostrils caught again the mingled aromas of fresh balm cakes and stale beer.

I was beset suddenly by a most overwhelming sense of loss. Was it worth it? Peter had asked me, and I had temporized. It was not. I knew now what I had paid, and could compute the golden coins that had gone in payment for the dross which life was giving to me with such an air of prodigality and good-will.

I grasped Peter's arm and swung him from the door of the tap-room to another room beyond it on the opposite side of the corridor.

"In here," I said, hoarsely.

"But . . ."

"In here!" I said.

"All right, you needn't get heated about it. Hello, what's wrong? Something upset you? I suppose it's the reaction. Never mind, lad, a stoup of the best and bit-terest will mend you."

I expected—I almost feared—that the pleasant woman who had served our sacramental tea would reappear to make the past even more vivid, but it was a young girl of about twenty who came. We ordered our ale and sent out a drink to the cabman at the door.

Peter surveyed me over the rim of his pint pot.

"Well, congratulations and good wishes and all the triumphs of Rome, and whatever I should be wishing you, Cæsar!"

I had a sudden sense of leaving the Wall, as if after hard years of service I was to return for my crown to the Capital which now, for the first time, had no attraction for me.

"Wish me luck, Sinbad, and leave the rest," I bade him.

"Luck! I thought you had that without anybody wishing it to you. What a pair of posturing asses we are! Here's luck to both of us—to all three of us—you and me and the queen over the water—luck!"

We drank, and he repeated with infinite scorn and contempt the word "luck" as he put down the empty pot.

"Let's have some more," I suggested.

"Yes. Why not? We shall not have many more together, shall we?"

The girl came at his summons and we drank again. There was magic in the homely brew, for our moods changed. Life, that had seemed so much an affair of disillusionment, so palpably a confidence trick, was, after all, a gallant adventure. I, who was to conquer London, and Peter, who was to show the East how the West could build, were not to be rebuffed because our youth was wearing out, because an old dream had been shattered. We were of better metal than that.

For no reason at all we laughed at each other, as we had not laughed for half a decade, purposelessly and from sheer affection, as is the manner of boyhood.

"I feel better for that," said he, setting down an empty pot for the second time. "And now let's prepare for the congratulations of Headley. 'Headley is your washpot and out over Wexminster have you cast forth your shoe?'—you dashed great galoot. What I want to

know is, what the devil you Parliament men are going to do about South Africa. . . .”

I was still explaining the fine points of Imperial policy when the cab decanted us at the steps of the club, where a reception committee had prepared a congratulatory luncheon. In the hall a knot of wives and daughters gave to the somber place an unaccustomed air of jollity.

Florence detached herself and came possessively to greet me.

§ 2

There was a week to be spent in Headley before I went South to take my seat, a week of feverish clearings-up at my office, of long talks with George Lawton, of farewells, and love making. Old Preeby, the solicitor, had taken my affairs in hand, and he and George and I had several conferences as to how my interests could best be manipulated, for not only did I want as great an income as my shares in the *Chronicle* and my accumulated savings could be made to yield, but I had to face, improbable as it was, the possible contingency that some future election would deprive me of my Membership and send me back to the old journalistic life. It was after one of these talks that I sauntered over to my club, there to snatch a late luncheon before meeting Florence for tea and talk and a leisurely drive in the cool of the evening.

The after-luncheon crowd at the club filled the billiards room. The dining-room was empty, and when I went downstairs again for my coffee even the smoke-room was housing only one other member. He was drinking at the little bar, but as I ordered my own drink at a table in the window he turned and came staggering over to me. He was quite young, but his face had that inflamed and almost bloated quality which proclaims not merely the habitual toper but the incipient dipsomaniac. He was already, at three in the afternoon, very drunk. I did

not know him, but there was something tantalizingly familiar about his personality.

He stood, glass in hand, looking down on me where I sat, making way for the waiter who brought my coffee by reeling with his hand on the back of a chair, and laughing weakly as he preserved, by what to him must have seemed a miracle of skill, his precarious balance.

After an uncomfortably prolonged silence he addressed me.

"Hullo!" he said.

"Hullo."

"You don't know me. But I know you. Know you very well. Known you for years and years and years. Have a drink?"

"No thanks."

"What? Won't have a drink?"

I tapped my coffee cup. The foolish face became overcast.

"Say, Peyton, not 'turned teetotaler, have you?"

"No. But I've just finished lunch."

"Oh. Jus' finished lunch. I haven't had any lunch. Better have some lunch, hadn't I? Have some more lunch with me?"

Again I refused his hospitality. He still stood over me, swaying as he gripped the friendly chair at his side.

"Wai'er, wai'er—bring me s'm' lunch."

"Yes sir, what would you like?"

"Sammidge—ham sammidge—two ham sammidges—cut thick. Thick. Devilish thick. And s'm' 'ore whisky. Cut strong."

He gripped the waiter's lapel and laughed.

"Cut devilish strong."

The waiter obligingly laughed with him, released himself tactfully, and went.

"Bad thing, not have lunch. Mush obliged for reminder. All bes' people have lunch. Have you had any lunch?"

He was a thoroughly hateful young man of a thoroughly detestable type. Headley was full of him. The fathers made the money and the sons drank themselves to death with a paternal bounty out of all proportion to a provincial need. But it was impossible not to be amused by his owl-like gravity and his air of good humor. I reassured him that I had just finished my lunch.

"Jus' finish your lunch. S'good. I've jus' finished my lunch, too. Let's have some dinner together. Hello, waz this? Sammidges—great, thick sammidges—made of ham. I say, did you want sammidges made of ham?"

"These are your sandwiches, sir," explained the patient waiter.

"Oh. Oh. So they are. I remember now. Haven't had my lunch. Here you are. Keep change for rainy day. We'd berrer sit down to eat our sammidges."

By some extraordinary feat of contortion he seemed to reel into the chair at his side without moving his feet or releasing his grip of its back, and became very puzzled at the position of his arm.

"What do I want to hold on to back of chair for? I'm not drunk, am I? Had a few, p'raps. But all right after lunch."

He began to devour the first of the thick sandwiches greedily.

"Remember now, had no breakfas' this morning. Haven't been home since Tuesday. Got a girl at the Griffin. Nice girl. Pure as a lily—white as driven snow. Keepin' me straight. Called Penelope." He stared at me stolidly with his owl-like gaze, as I tried to sip my coffee without showing signs of either amusement or disgust. "Say, I've always thought a lot of you, Peyton," he next informed me. I thought it politic to say nothing. "You don' know me, but I know you. S'dam' funny, that is, when you come to think of it." He was speaking with a mouth full of thick bread and boiled ham, and retribution seized him. For several minutes he coughed and

spluttered. "Gosh. Crumb gone wrong way." He emptied half his glass of whisky, and shuddered. "Better now. Mush berrer now. What was I sayin'? Oh, yes. You don' know me. I'm Bowden."

So this sodden fish was the degenerate brother of whom I had heard much from everyone but the members of his own family. I cannot say that I was pleased by the prospect of such a brother-in-law. I am no prig, but I have always had a kind of fastidiousness which is not far removed from priggery.

He continued his ravenous assault upon his sandwich.

"Now you know me an' I know you. Mush berrer know each other. Coz you're goin' to marry Florence an' I'm her brother."

He hiccupped alarmingly.

"I'm sorry you're goin' marry Floernce, coz I like you. Decen' chap."

"I think you'd better trot home and have a sleep, hadn't you?" I said, taking his fraternal dislike to his sister as some kind of drunken jest.

"No. Mus'n' do that. If I go sleep in middle of day get caught by those dam' gole fish."

"Goldfish?"

"Yes. Great gole fish—gole fish—you know, gole fish—big ones that come after you when you're asleep. What was I sayin'? Oh, yes. Sorry you're goin' marry my sister. My sister's no good. She's a damned whore."

The boy was obviously far gone towards delirium tremens and could not know what he was saying, but impulse is stronger than reason at such times. Before I had realized what I was doing I had jumped up and dealt him a flat handed buffet which overturned him and his chair together. The sight of him sprawling helplessly on the floor, still clutching his sandwich, ended my abrupt and flaming rage. I helped him up. Fortunately the waiter had retired into the little bar and the room was still empty.

Young Bowden shook himself, opened and closed his eyes a few times, and then resumed his meal and his chair together.

"What was that? Train gone off rails. These French railways no dam' good. Let's finish our lunch. What was I sayin'? Oh, yes. My sister is . . ."

"Look here, you young fool. Pull yourself together."

"What? I am together. What was I sayin'? Oh, yes. . . ."

"Shut up!"

"What?"

"Shut up."

"Waffor? You're not offended, are you? I like you. Only trying to do you good turn. You're not the first who's . . ."

"Will you shut up!"

"No, I won' shurrup. Why should I—shurrup? Let's have some more sammidges. Wai'er, wai'er!"

The waiter came.

"Call a cab for this gentleman, waiter," I commanded.

"Don' wan' a cab. Want more sammidges. Can't make my lunch off a cab. Dam' silly."

The waiter leaned over the table towards me.

"It's all right, sir. Leave him to me."

He turned to my intractable companion.

"Come on, Mr. Bowden, they're waiting for you at the Griffin."

The word had a magical effect. Young Bowden ceased from his vacant stare at the empty plate whereon no thick "sammidges" rested and stood to his feet. He seemed for a moment to regain command of himself, but only for a moment. He smiled down again at me, as he had smiled when he first crossed the room.

"Mus' go now, Peyton. Lil girl at Griffin waiting for me. Pure as a lily and white as driven snow. Remember what I said 'bout Florence. I like you. Always have

liked you. Always shall like you. But got to go now. S'long."

He reeled towards the door. My impulse was to stop him and have him sent home, and I fancy the sophisticated waiter must have divined my thought.

"That will be all right, sir. Mrs. Pullin at the Griffin will put him to bed. Mrs. Bowden wouldn't want him at home in that state."

"Is he often like this?" I asked ingenuously.

"Not often, sir. Always," replied the waiter, and returned to his eyrie behind the little bar.

To say that I was perturbed by the encounter is to phrase mildly the emotion which gripped me. It was not that his slanderous word for his sister had in any way caused me for the minutest portion of time to lose anything of my infatuate loyalty to her. She must, I had always known, have had other wooers before our encounter, and this maudlin boy had no doubt misinterpreted the relationships, as he, with his debased view of life, would misinterpret them. Nor was it that I shrank from linking my life even at one remove to such a caricature of manhood as he had become. A drunken brother-in-law would be an incessant nuisance, but I was accustomed, I told myself, to deal with nuisances. But following Peter's expression of aversion to the Bowden family, that afternoon's apparition had, in some inscrutable way, given pause for the first time to my insensate determination to possess Florence whatever else I missed or gained.

That I was sitting in that depressing smoke-room weighing life was itself another reminder of how low had come to be the line of my spiritual flight. I, who had begun with a will to achieve beauty and fine reforms, was reduced to contemplating a political career embarked upon as the result of an arrangement of sorts with a local Peer, following a career in journalism which had quickly deteriorated from the pursuit of great aims by creative means. I, who had seen the love relationship be-

tween man and woman as the subsummation of all other service into a personal devotion wherein flesh and spirit commingled to attain divinity, was reduced to analyzing my love for the one woman who now attracted me into a balance of advantages, the advantage of allaying my physiological unrest by securing her to my bed and board, as against the advantage of freeing myself from uncomely associations by foregoing her possession.

But could I forego that possession, even if a mood of cynical selfishness prompted me to a breach? I was linked already, not only by intimacies which had aroused in me a want never before felt, but by a pledge as valid, to me, as any altar-given allegiance. I might have stood placidly by while baser men diluted the holy wine of life with drugs of their own devising, but I could not remain quiescent while a baser self even indicated that a word once given was not itself sacramental.

Nor, really, I was at last compelled to feel, did I wish to make any such breach. It was Florence I craved, for in her warm and zestful comradeship all doubts and dimays at the revealed sordidity of life would be resolved. The haphazard compromises which I had made with my too youthful idealism I would eventually see as the appointed price for an ultimate gain, to be purchased only by such slow degrees of surrender.

It was impossible to formulate, even wordlessly to my own mind, just what Florence meant to me. She was a way of escape from psychological chaos, a directive point for my march towards whatever end awaited me, a composing point about which all activities could center. She was significance. Life without her would be a stupid twirling to some devil's orchestra, and living would be only a crude expression of an egomania, no less an auto-eroticism because it expressed itself in things of the mind. She was all that Joan had been, with an added quality of sophistication and exuberance. Even her glowing physical beauty had become a need to me, for which my eyes

yearned as an addict might yearn for his solacing anodyne at the end of a day spent amidst harassing realities.

What did it matter, what could it ever matter, that all about her was a world to which she, no less than I, was a stranger? The Bowden family, her past suitors, her silly and empty friends would pass from our lives once we were together in our own home and amongst men and women whose interpretation of life was akin to ours. So I almost persuaded myself; and yet I knew in the innermost recesses of my mind, despite all self-persuasion, that never now would life be the fine spacious adventure that I had once intended it to be. The dream that I could move with clean detachment in a world in which all values were appraised dispassionately was only a dream, had never been other than a dream. No man, least of all a man such as I, could live only in a world of idealistic abstractions. Life would grow more and more a business of material satisfactions, of compromises and abasements. Statecraft would reveal itself more and more as a game of political expediciencies, and love as a series of changing emotions inspired and directed by passions and reactions all too human in their own inception.

In Prosperity Street our cramped physical environment had served to show the great world as a region of limitless promise, in which courage and a clean heart were the only requisites to attainment. But now I seemed to see attainment as the reward not of courage but of luck and cunning, and the mere phrase "a clean heart" revolted me as a piece of meaningless sentimentality. The heart, I had found, was not one's own to command.

A striking clock brought me out of my gloomy reverie. I left the club and made my way through the unprepossessing streets to the rendezvous where Florence awaited me, and, as I walked, vanity came to my aid. The eagerness with which men who were strangers to me saluted me reminded me that I was a figure in this place.

After all, I had not been conquered by circumstance, whatever stratagems and adventitious tides of battle had been necessary to keep me from defeat. It was something in a mass of men to be a significance. "A brute I might have been, and would not sink i' the scale!" If I found the streets which enmeshed me sordid and vulgar, and the relationships which I had formed neither inspiring nor beautiful, mine was the power in some measure to alter these things. And neither Florence nor I had made terms with life. We had not denied, but neither had we unresistingly indulged, the urges which filled us. If we were the victims of some predestined working out of forces but casually housed in our two beings, we were victims aware of our fate, and embracing it willingly. But—I could not help but realize—for all our soaring ecstasies and for all our joy in each other something was lacking between us, some primal sanctity. I was like a man who drank some rich wine, grateful to his palate, but unsatisfying, because he remembered cool water that had once assuaged his untutored boyish thirst.

§ 3

"I met your brother to-day," I told Florence when we had talked over the major incidents of our ten hours' separation since the previous night. Her face clouded.

"Isn't he a horror? I suppose you had to meet him some time. Was he . . .?"

"He was. Very much so."

"He's killing himself, and I can't be sorry. He makes me ashamed. But it isn't really his fault, Frank. The wonder is that any of us stay clean, the way we are taught to live."

"Which way are you taught to live?"

"No way. That's just the trouble. People like Papa have far too much money. They don't know how to spend it. Look at Bert and me, everything we need, if money can buy it—and nothing we need, if money can't. They feed

us, clothe us, and stimulate us, and then they forget to give us the kind of outlets that real people have. And we go wrong."

"You don't seem to have gone wrong, Florence."

I said it, God forgive me, with no conviction. Her brother's odious word came back to my mind.

"Haven't I, Frank? Perhaps I haven't. But it's not from any want of trying. It'll be different when we are married, though, altogether different. I shall make you a good wife, Frank. You don't know what a debt I owe you."

"You—owe me!"

"Oh, I mean it. Quite apart from being in love with you, you know. A kind of accumulated debt over all these years, ever since I was a girl at school, and you seemed such a romantic person. You seemed to be one of a favored few who knew what they were doing, you and your little art mistress and Mr. Wass, and those others. You were all so poor and all so happy. I remember being at the theater once. We had a box, just to show we could afford it. And up in the gallery, there you all were. You don't know how I envied you all. And how jealous I was of that other girl."

"I say, you mustn't say things like that. You make me feel like a conceited ass of a fellow. . . ."

"Why shouldn't you be a conceited ass of a fellow? You have every right to be—you, with all the gifts!"

"All the gifts!"

"Why, how bitter you sound. Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing. Except perhaps, the reaction from all the excitement of the past few weeks. But, Florence—"

"Yes?"

"You are quite certain about things, aren't you?"

"About what things? About wanting to be married soon and to get out of this place, and begin life all over again with you? Oh, my dear, how can you ask?"

We pressed hands under the cover of the damask cloth that draped the little table, and I was reassured.

"Yes," I said. "We'll start life all over again, and start clean."

"You're a strange boy, Frank. You've never asked me if I had any art mistresses in my past."

"Art mistresses?"

"Stupid. I mean—lovers."

"Had you?"

"You'd better ask Bert," she answered, and laughed. "I had. I'd dozens. Well, not dozens. But some. Only they weren't lovers, Frank. They were playthings—to pass the time. I've only been in love once, with you. You believe that, don't you, my dear? When we start clean, we shall really start clean. I'm not a fool, Frank, you know, but I am . . . " She blushed suddenly before she ended the sentence ". . . unscathed," she said.

This time it was I who almost cried "My Dear!"

"I wanted to say that, Frank, because sometimes when Bert is like that he says things that aren't true. He says them to me."

"Did you think . . . "

"That you doubted me? Yes, of course I thought so, and of course you must have done. You wouldn't have been human if you hadn't. But you don't now I've told you, do you? That's all that matters. Don't let's talk of it again. It's ugly. I don't want *us* only to be lovers, Frank. I want us to be pals as well, after we're married."

I had always hated the diminutive of her name which so many of her friends used, but it came now naturally to my own lips.

"You're a good sort, Flo," I said.

She gave a sigh of utter contentment.

"That's exactly what I meant!" she said.

Then suddenly we laughed together, purposelessly, as Peter and I had laughed in the inn, as boys laugh from sheer delight in being alive and young. I felt that the

primal simplicity which I had an hour before bewailed had returned to me, and that everything was again for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

§ 1

WHEN I TOOK MY seat in Parliament, the Autumn Session of that year had but a few days to run. I went up to London in a mood far different from that which in my boyish reveries of such a journey had always seemed inevitable. The great fact that I had realized not the least important of my ambitions was no longer a great fact. My mind was quite as actively concerned with other considerations. I had to meet George Lawton and the new Duke of Wexminster that we might interview and appoint a successor to myself as editor of our newspapers. I had to see one or two houses and report upon them to Florence, that she might come to London before Christmas and choose a habitation for us to occupy after our marriage, which was to be celebrated with the new year. Even the glamor of the capital had been worn a little threadbare by my many occasional visits during the past few years, when the business of the papers had taken me there.

At the moment when, between my two sponsors, the two Headley members, I advanced towards the Speaker I did, it is true, recapture that enviable thrill which is a compound of sheer vulgar triumph and modest incredulity. That the nonentity who had once been grateful enough for a poorly paid post on a very indifferent and obscure provincial paper, who had found a refuge in the little house in Prosperity Street, was now concentrating upon himself the attention of the House of Commons,

occurred to me as essentially right, but essentially incredible. I should, no doubt, waken at any moment to find Marion Mary Gallus at my bedside with a breakfast tray. . . .

My brain was not only clear, but was functioning like a triple-ring circus. In one part of it there gyrated pictures of the past ten years. In another, Florence and Joan seemed poised in some attitude of fond and foolish, but very just, admiration. In the third, the forefront of my consciousness, the immediate, objective scene stood clear-cut. I saw what might have been a raree-show of celebrities provided for my especial benefit. They looked, I thought, singularly like their caricatures. Balfour, lying, apparently, on the small of his back, and toying with the cord of his eye-glasses; Hicks-Beach, the "Black Michael" of affectionate or disparaging club allusion, tugging at his beard; Chamberlain, with his pointed nose thrust out not at our advancing trio but into a Blue Book. And, facing them, Sir William Harcourt, elephantine but alert; Morley, with his dried and arid face; Herbert Asquith, still possessing the mouth and profile of a puritan, and Fowler, looking the incarnation of respectability. These stood out. As I shook hands with the Speaker I noticed Edward Grey in the shadows behind the Chair, deep in talk with the rotund Haldane, and as I turned bereft now of my sponsors, to find a seat, I took positive encouragement from the smile which Edward Clarke bestowed upon me.

If I gave an impression of self-possession, I did not share it. The long wait at the Bar, while Questions had dragged themselves out interminably, and the ordeal of that slow advancement, broken by the three bows, so much more difficult to give than they had been during our friendly rehearsal of the little ceremony, had made me exceedingly grateful that Florence was not watching from behind the grille, but no sooner was I seated than I anxiously wished for some reassurance, such as she would

have given, that I had not been the clumsy fool that I had felt.

My work for the party in Headley had brought me into touch with many of my fellow Members, and it was into a seat beside that of such an acquaintance that I had dropped after my introduction. There was a pleasant moment of congratulation and whispering before we turned our attention to the droning Minister on his feet at the Treasury table. . . .

The debate was not such as to grip the average Member, and as it proceeded the House thinned rapidly. I was not sorry to slip out of the Chamber, after an interval sufficiently decorous in a newcomer, and to mingle with the jumble of Members and non-Members in the inner Lobby, there to give and exchange the greetings suitable to my new estate. Morton-Wigley, one of our Whips, took charge of me for a while, like some friendly prefect taking pity on a new boy in the Lower Remove, found me a "pair," on the assumption that I would wish to attend some private celebration of the great day, and genially dismissed me.

But I had no private celebration awaiting me. Peter Wass had been held in the North by some professional business. George Lawton had fought shy of attendance in the gallery. Even Wexminster had merely put in an appearance in the Peers' Gallery and then made his way back to the Upper House. I wandered out into Palace Yard and chartered a hansom-cab, telling the man to drive me to the hotel where I was temporarily housed.

It is hard to remember just how different was the street scene which confronted me that first time I left Palace Yard from the scene which I see now each day, after thirty years of change. There were the old horse 'buses, hardly bigger than the growlers which moved so leisurely where now the taxi-cabs hurtle their swifter way. Our modern motor-'buses would have seemed then like leviathans had they been suddenly imposed upon

London traffic. The lighting was yellower and the people, though I seem to recall them as just such a dense crowd, were like another race. The men were nearly all garbed, as I was, in frock-coats and silk hats, and the women had puffed-out sleeves and trailing skirts, with hats perched precariously upon piled-up hair. There was more obvious poverty. One saw more shabby men and more draggletailed women. Barefooted boys were commoner, and there were drunken men about on the pavements at all hours of the day.

As we were stayed in our course by a small crowd which had gathered about one of the new-fangled horseless cars that had broken down, to the great delight of jeering 'bus drivers, just by the corner of Northumberland Avenue, I remember wondering how long it would take us to cure the worst of the evils that were, to me, so glaringly apparent in our social scheme, and I regained for a moment or two something of the ingenuous belief in purely political remedies which had in my adolescence prompted my earliest ambition.

As we waited for the little mob to make way for the stream of traffic, of which my hansom was the point, my eye was caught by a newspaper vendor's contents bill. There was the inevitable screech about South Africa. There was a bill which merely announced that "Joe Hits Out," and another with some reference to the Tsar and Peace. But that which held my attention was of no such grave appeal. It was a fluttering pink sheet held over the knees of the old woman whose wares were spread in the angle of two buildings, and held by her in such a way that I could not glimpse the name of the paper whose contents it advertised to the passers-by. "Murderess Dies in Prison," I read, and had my hand ready to signal through the trap of the hansom, when the little traffic jam was eased and we moved off at the spanking pace which was the characteristic of that vehicle.

I sat back again. After all, it might not be Joan's

mother who had died. There must be, I told myself, other murderesses. But if it were. . . . Now, surely, Joan must reveal herself. I wondered if Peter Wass had seen the news and had taken any steps to intercept Joan if she had returned to Headley.

In the hall of my hotel I gathered a batch of evening papers—there were eight or nine of them in those days—and went towards the smoke-room. The clerk in the office called my name as I passed him, and I stayed my steps to take the two letters he held out to me. One was addressed in the open scrawl of Florence. The other, in a *Chronicle* envelope, would be, I surmised, from George Lawton.

In the quietude of the smoke-room I had an odd moment of indecision, with the letter from Florence balanced between my finger and thumb and the papers held in my other hand.

Why, now, after these years, should I worry myself about Joan? She had passed so utterly out of the realities of my life that, if we found her again, she could only be a complication. And she would have altered. Joan Agnew to-day could not be the eager, ingenuous girl of the days when my boyish vanity and egotism had driven her to sever herself rather than allow me to hamper my shaping career by a continuance of an attachment detrimental to all my petty aspirations. It was even possible that the passing of time had destroyed her own sensitive idealism. She might by now be Joan Agnew no longer.

And yet the dream Joan, with whose image I had so often comforted my loneliest hours, whose fancied virtues had so often in reverie been set against the failings of other women, with whom I had stayed deeply in love despite the ardent affection that Florence had conjured in me, the dream Joan who had never ceased to fill her place in my life, swayed me still. I crammed the letter from Florence into my pocket and opened the first of my newspapers, to read there of the death of Mabel Agnew

and a sensational account of the poisoning of her husband which had brought her to such an end.

§ 2

The next morning brought both Peter Wass and George Lawton to London. Peter came straight to me at my hotel. He had traveled by the night mail and it was very early when the chambermaid knocked at my door to tell me that he was below. I told the girl to bring him up to my room and to bring some tea for us.

I was envious again of his strange faculty for conquering those circumstances which so affect the externals of most of us. As he entered he looked as if he had that moment left the hands of a skilled valet prepared for the journey he had just ended. Night traveling, even so recently as those days, was not conducive to spruceness, but Sinbad was neither ruffled nor bleary-eyed. He was the same trim and clean-cut man-about-town that he would have been in any circumstances.

"Hello, Dogsboddy. Sorry to waken you. How did the ordeal go yesterday?"

"Hello, Sinbad. I've told them to make some tea for us. You must be parched and tired."

"I am, rather. I'll have a cold bath when we've had a talk."

He flung his traveling rug on to my tousled bed, looked at himself in the mirror, settled his tie, and then seated himself in the wicker-bottomed bedroom chair. I sat, in my dressing-gown, on the bed edge.

"Did you fall over the Mace?" was his next question.

"No. It went off all right, I think. As a matter of fact, Sinbad, the whole affair was rather a disappointment."

"It always is, I should think, unless you've won a doubtful by-election. In your case, of course, there was no reason why anybody should get excited."

We were both of us fencing for time. He was as reluctant to blurt out the reason for his journey as I to

put him to the direct question. The girl came with the two cups of tea. She was an undernourished but not unpretty Cockney, not yet a victim to that irresistible something which makes hotel chambermaids either plain viragoes or fat slovens. Peter jollied her for a moment or two with some kind of chaff and she went off promising to have his bath ready for him and to bring us the pot from which our cups of tea had been poured.

"They're all alike, these damned hotels, Dogsboddy. You order early tea, and they bring one tepid cup of the stuff. What we want is a piping hot supply without all this swim of milk in it. Ah, here she is. That's a good girl. Don't forget, Gertie, I want the bath stone cold, but the towel nicely warmed. Oh, and Gertie—I suppose your name is Gertie, isn't it? . . . "

"No, sir. It's Martha."

"Not good enough for you. I shall call you Gertie. You look like Gertie. Look here, Gertie, nip downstairs for me and get the Continental railway guide, will you?"

With me such girls are tolerably civil and willing, but with Peter they were positively enthusiastic. The re-christened Martha went like a lamb, instead of telling him to ring for the Boots.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Italy."

"Then she's there? You've found her?"

He nodded.

"You saw the announcement?" he asked. "I thought you might. As a matter of fact I heard some days ago that the mother was ill. I've kept a fairly close touch. Do you remember I once met a good fellow at a football match who was a warder? I looked out for him again after Joan went. He gave me a useful tip or two. You can always get information about what is going on inside a prison if you take care not to approach the official people."

"But why didn't you tell me about this . . . ?"

"What was the use while there was really nothing to tell? It would have been no earthly interest to you that I was keeping a line on the jail. Besides, you were always such a busy man of affairs that I didn't want to disturb your . . . "

"Don't gibe, Sinbad."

"I'm not gibing, old man. I really didn't mean to hurt you. I mean it. What *was* the use of making you unsettled for no reason? Joan had gone, we couldn't find her, and we were both able to forget what asses we'd been about her. And when you met Florence Bowden I felt sure that as far as you were concerned it was all over and done with."

"But where is she?"

"Joan? She's in Rome. When I found that the mother was desperately ill—she took a turn for the worse two days ago—I went and saw the Governor and told him that it was no use promising to forward letters, and that I wanted to go and see the girl. I worked the old friend of the family trick. It came off. After a lot of humming and hawing and all kinds of stuff about breaches of duty he gave me the address. I sent off a long telegram telling Joan I was coming and that it was no use her returning, because she couldn't get here in time to be of any use, waited until the end came yesterday, and then packed my bag."

"Peter, I'm coming too."

"Don't be an ass. How can you come? You have your fool's seat in Parliament, and the papers, and Florence, all holding you back. And, if you did come, what use would you be? You don't suppose that Jimbo wants to hear a first-hand account of her successor in your young affections, do you?"

His use of her old nickname and his tone, no less than his actual words, cut me like a whiplash. It was a preposterous situation, that I should be sitting there with

bare ankles balancing a cup of hotel tea, while he sat and reduced my deepest emotions to the mock-heroics of a cad by words dropped out between sips at his own cracked cup. Brutus and Cassius had at least a tent and an army to give grace to their quarrel. I could not battle with him in that dingy little bedroom. And I could not contest the truth of what he said. What right had I, of all people, to be interested in Joan?

"No," I said, "you're right. Of course I can't come with you. Will you bring her back?"

"I don't know. It all depends on what she is doing, and how she is placed."

"I suppose she isn't . . ."

He did not allow me to finish.

"She's still Miss Agnew, if that's what is worrying you."

"I'm glad of that," I said.

"So am I. But I don't know why the devil we should be. I'm not sure, Frank, that we're not a pair of supremely sentimental idiots. Joan may be a plump, commonplace little school m'arm nowadays."

"Not she!"

"In any event, she won't want us butting into her life again. We've changed a bit, you know."

"I don't think you've changed very much, Sinbad."

"Haven't I? You don't realize it, old son. Wait until somebody who hasn't seen or heard anything of me for all these years begins to contrast the complacent swine of a fellow that I am now with the decent young idiot I occasionally was then. But I'm going to risk it. And now for the cold bath. Will you order breakfast? I'm very peckish after that rotten journey. Be lavish."

He left me to my thoughts. I took from my pocket Florence's letter and reread it, with some kind of idea that it would dismiss again the image of Joan which was obsessing my mind. Florence wrote breezily, as a man might have written, and her letter was a queer mixture of

reckless endearments and pieces of personal news. Her father had told her that she was to have a marriage settlement which would surprise the close-fisted cads of Headley who didn't know how to treat their daughters, so that she and I would be very rich and could make what kind of a splash we chose. Her brother had at last been persuaded to take a cure in some home. She had bought lace undies which would astonish me. (I remember, such was the prevailing reticence of that time, that when I first read the letter I was momentarily baffled by the very words "undies.") She was very lonely, but was being good, and would I be quick and come back to Headley. That and some chatter about my Parliamentary début made the letter. It was very much the product of its writer, jovially sophisticated, lacking any hint of subtlety or those delicate refinements of mind and phrase which were supposed to be essential to any "nice" girl, but genuine and, in an undefinable but unmistakable way "chummy," if such a word can express the precise shade of comradely understanding that I mean. Having written it, she no doubt challenged her father to a game of billards or drove over to gossip with her friend, Jenny, a gossip, I imagined, with few reserves and dwelling much upon the ardencies of love-making.

How different she was from Joan! For a while I set my mind playing Hamlet, and comparing their pictures as memory presented them—Joan with her quiet moods, her delicate taste, and Florence with her flamboyant zest and her vigorous prejudices.

I was still so engaged when the maid reappeared with the railway guide for Peter and the information for me that my own bath was ready.

§ 3

Peter Wass shared my cab as far as the railway station, leaving me to drive on to the London offices of our

papers, there to meet George Lawton and Wexminster. My mood was chameleon, for as I waved a farewell to my friend I seemed to shed the romantic melancholy which had possessed me since reading the previous night of Mabel Agnew's death in prison, with the hope it brought of a reunion with Joan. As we rattled along Fleet Street I was neither the self-accusative lover of Joan nor the doubting lover of Florence. I was wholly the young man of affairs, very purposeful and extremely self-satisfied. The mid-morning bustle of the streets, the keen air I breathed, and the business before me combined to drive from my mind any regrets for the past or fears for the future. The present was my kingdom.

Not until we had interviewed and engaged my successor for the Chair at Headley, and lunched him well, did my thought return to my private worries, and even then with no true concentration or penetration, for on that second day the House of Commons did really exercise its fascination upon me. The day of my entrance had been somehow flat and depressing. The next day was stimulating and exhilarating. It was a late sitting, and I realized with something of a pang that I had that day neither written to Florence nor adjusted my mental attitude towards the two Joans, the real Joan to whose presence Peter Wass was speeding as fast as boat and train could take him, and the dream Joan who was still mistress of my imagination. I had been, actually, too intent upon savoring the personalities which had obtruded themselves upon me.

As I drank a night-cap of hotel coffee I seriously wondered if I were not abnormal. By all the best canons of fiction I should have been possessed either by one or the other of the two women or solely concentrated upon the sorry dilemma which confronted me. The emotional complex should have been the concern of my day. It had not been so. My day as I looked back upon it was a resolving series of impressions of people whose

relationship to me was far from personal in its import and significance.

I saw George Lawton being very forceful and dominant to Ralph Simms, that new journalistic product of the Hillsdun regime in Fleet Street who was to take my place on the *Chronicle*, and Simms, in his terse way, being as forceful and dominant with George, while Wexminster and I looked on at their parley.

"Of course, if I come to you, I don't write. I quite definitely don't write a line. That's understood, isn't it? We hire people to write. I shall edit. A modern editor hasn't any business to waste his time writing," Simms had said, either wilfully regardless of my own practice or determined to show me that I, although some years his junior, was a professional anachronism. I think he thought me something of a renegade, since I had deserted journalism for politics and the making of books.

He had interested *me* enormously, that morning, with his insistence upon the need to interest people, rather than to inform or lead them. I quite saw that he and George would work well together, better perhaps than George and I had done. They had stayed in the Club to sample its old brandy when Wexminster and I had driven down to the House. "I hope we haven't made a bloomer, Peyton. I'm not sure that the music-hall mind is exactly what they want at Headley, even yet," the Duke had said, but I had reassured him with the belief that both George and his new editor were skilled enough to hire, as they phrased it, minds that were not of the music-hall.

We neither of us had the foresight then to realize that before a decade was out our little group of local papers would be willingly surrendered to the Hillsdun brothers, or that in three decades such a private group would be as rare in the English provinces as the type of vehicle in which we so complacently drove would be rare in the capital.

The House of Commons itself had completely filled my mind for the rest of the day. There was the intellectual interest of the actual proceedings there, Harcourt and Chamberlain had been embattled, and Henry Labouchere had contributed one of those cynical speeches of his which had whipped both sides to something of a subdued frenzy. There had been a little scene between a Welsh Liberal, named George, and one of his own leaders, and even later the speeches had managed to maintain an unusually high level. I had found myself deliberately studying the technique of the place, and grimly calculating whether I should venture on my maiden speech during the few days of the session or reserve it for the new year.

And out of the debating chamber, in the lobbies and the dining-room, the world of men was far too vivid and real to permit any shadowy wraiths of women to obtrude. I dined with Waterson, the Disestablishment fanatic, and Sir Paul Lawly, whose pet topic was the Northwest frontier, and we talked, I remember, exclusively about whether Hazlitt really wrote better prose than some of our contemporaries. Old Waterson displayed a quite savage hatred of Robert Louis Stevenson, and Lawly and I began to cap quotations from Cobbett.

As I crossed the lobby I was buttonholed by Maple, then, as now, the astute and able correspondent of *The Age*, who was anxious to gather my opinion, as a Northern Member, about some speech which Rosebery had delivered the previous night, and again by Burroughs, his rival of the *Wire*, whose anxiety was to discover what we were thinking about some proposed commercial treaty with France. . . .

Reviewing these things late at night in the hotel smoke-room I wondered, as I have said, whether I was really the normal man. Surely, I told myself, I should have spent that day quite distraught by speculations as to the result of Peter's journey and searching examinations of

my real emotion towards Florence. And yet, even when I had brought myself deliberately to a mood of such introspection, I was conscious of nothing but a rather hopeless feeling that not I but some outside Fate was in control of the very relationships which should have been, which indeed were, the essentials of my life.

I wondered, with an almost idle detachment, to which I would have turned had there stood before me Joan, with her delicate pastel-like beauty and her proud little face, and Florence, with her rich coloring and her ardent, eager gesture of possessive appeal, Joan, with her quiet certitude that I was to be a noble artist in words, and Florence, with her blithe assumption that she and I were to make "what kind of splash we chose" in a world where nothing mattered but the gratification of one's haphazard desires, whether for physical fulfillments or mental satisfactions.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

§ 1

WHEN PARLIAMENT was prorogued Florence, trailing in her wake a rather breathless and bewildered mother, came to London to choose her house. George Lawton, in a new burst of energy and intentness, plunged me into a mass of business connected with the partnership which he insisted should be created between us in addition to our joint association with the newspapers. I saw through the Press a new volume of political essays, ready for publication in the New Year, when their appearance might give an extra interest to my maiden speech. But no word came from Italy. I had hoped that when Peter Wass had talked with her Joan would write, for I could not believe that she had lost her affection for me, and I felt that Peter's account of my careerist progress would have

quickenened rather than chilled her interest in my affairs. I wondered, too, how the knowledge of Florence had affected her.

With Florence herself I found myself more than ever enamoured, but always with a faint sense that something was lacking in the emotion which we conveyed to each other. We laughed and chattered together, wandered through shops, saw exhibitions of pictures, visited theaters, went, like any other provincials, to see the sights of the town, with Mrs. Bowden as our garrulous chaperone. Sometimes, in dim corridors for the most part, we were alone for a provocative moment or two, and there were sudden intimate exchanges of caresses which left us breathlessly ardent until a reaction of impatient discontent caused us to become singularly abrupt with each other and the maternal tertium quid. But I doubted no longer that my need was for Florence, that having been the victim of her peculiar magic I would never again be free from the desire for her companionship and the lust for her warm responsive body.

And yet—and yet—I wanted Joan, too. I discovered in myself a frank polygamist, who amazed me by his shameless refusal to pretend that in his sentimentalizing of the remembered girl who had first inflamed him there was anything treacherous to the woman who now infatuated him. The daily thwarted expectation of some word from either Peter or Joan had the dual effect of stimulating my love for Florence even as it gave new reality to my reveries about Joan. I did not pretend to reconcile to my theoretical conceptions of loyalty the actual division of my love between two such objects as the real woman and the remembered girl, although, I know, I was fretted by what I was still boy enough to think my degeneration from a once high code of personal honor.

One sop I had flung to conscience. I had told Florence of the discovery of Joan, and of Peter's journey to find her. She had not known of any tragedy behind the life

of the little art mistress whose freedom from restraint she had once so envied, and her response to the knowledge was characteristic of her warm human temperament. She was immediately possessed by a desire to have Joan brought to England and comforted for all that she had sustained during the years of exile. There was no shadow of jealousy or doubt in her attitude towards one of whose power to affect me she must have been well aware.

"We should do something, Frank," she said.

"But what can we do? Joan was always as proud as Lucifer. That was why she ran away from us all."

"Yes. I admire her for that. *I* wouldn't have run away. Your rotten career could have gone to pieces first. How she must have loved you."

I was more than a little uncomfortable at having the thing so flatly phrased.

"It was a boy and girl affair—calf love, you know," I temporized.

"Did you like her as much as you like me?"

"Yes. In a way. But there wasn't any you to like in those days."

"No. Of course there wasn't. But would you like her as much as you like me?"

"How could I!"

"What shall you do about her?"

"Nothing. At least, nothing until Peter comes back."

"Do you think he'll marry her?"

"Who, Peter?" I really had not brought myself to face such a possibility. I had evaded it, had wilfully made my mind blank towards it. "I shouldn't think so, because I don't think she'd marry him. . . ."

"Pooh! That's your vanity. I hope he does. It would be so—so—so fitting."

"Fitting?" I queried.

"Yes. It's obvious that he's been a kind of patient lover, isn't it? He's a better man than you are, Frank, by some standards."

"I know that."

She laughed at my woebegone tone.

"But not by our standards," she comforted me.

"You mean mine and yours?"

"No. I mean hers and mine. It's always the selfish people who get loved."

"Am I selfish?"

"You are a miracle of self-centered ambition."

I expostulated vehemently, but she cut short my protestations by a quick caress.

"Why, it's part of the thing we most like in you," she said.

"I don't seem self-centered to myself. Ambitious, yes. But only because I want to escape from the futility of being ordinary, of being obscure, of being unproductive, of being. . . ."

"Of being unnoticed. I think your little art mistress would approve of me, Frank. You see, I shall do for you just what she couldn't have done. I'll further your great plans for you."

"But I haven't any great plans."

"I don't believe you have at this very moment. But you had half an hour ago, and you will have the minute you've left me. Look at the way you've used George Lawton!"

"But I haven't. That is just what I haven't done. George has used me. Joan, and Peter Wass, and George Lawton, and now you, all maneuvering me into positions I never wanted to occupy, and then calling me selfishly ambitious. What I wanted was. . . ."

"Yes?"

"I don't know. I don't really know. But it wasn't to be a kind of cynical arrivist—a mere vulgar careerist—a thruster——"

"Oh, you're not that. There is something that saves you from that. You've a strain of greatness, Frank, and you've a queer sort of gentleness. But I know exactly

what that girl thought of you when she went. You ought to have chucked everything, and followed her."

"But I couldn't . . ." I began, ready with a torrent of explanations.

"I know you couldn't, but you should have done. I'm glad you didn't, because, if you had, I should never have known you, should I? But wait until we're married. Then we'll have her over to stay with us, and make things up."

"If she'll come," I said, hating the mere prospect of seeing the judgment in Joan's eye as she surveyed my relationship not only to Florence but to life in general.

"Oh, she'll come. She gave up far too much not to want to see the fruits of her romantic sacrifice."

And for the first time I detected just the faint hint of a sneer in the voice that had until now been filled by nothing but a kind of humorous wisdom, a kind of wise affection.

§ 2

Not until the day before the Bowdens and I were to travel North, to spend Christmas at Headley, did Peter show any sign of himself. I had been out to measure with Florence the windows and recesses of the house which we had taken in Smith Square, had escorted her and her mother back to their hotel, and had returned to mine to change for the dinner and theater with which we were to end this first London visit.

A page accosted me in the hall with the news that a gentleman awaited me in the smoke-room. I hurried in, expecting to find Lawton, but it was Sinbad's voice which hailed me.

He was sitting before one of the two fires in the big room drinking sherry. The decanter at his elbow and the glass in his hand made him seem, somehow, the incarnation of that stolid Englishry which detests above all things else the appearance of emotion.

We shook hands on a mere exchange of our nicknames, and he turned to pull the bell handle.

"Bring me another glass," he said to the answering waiter. Not until it had been brought and we were alone again did either of us speak. This almost calculated delay aroused in me a hope and a fear that warred together. I thought that perhaps Joan had returned to England with him, and I feared that some ill had befallen her and she would never again return.

"Did you find her?" I asked.

"Find her? Of course I found her."

"How is she?"

"Not a bit changed, Frank. Well, just a little changed. But very little. She is still incredibly girl-like, still the same ingenuous, simple Jimbo. It almost seemed as if she were playing at being grown-up. I mean, her hair is arranged differently, her expression is a bit older, but she hasn't grown hard, or tired, or slack. She's all right—I mean, all right in the ordinary sense. She spends half her time copying old masters for some firm of dealers, and the rest doing original stuff for illustrated papers. She isn't rich and she doesn't expect to be famous, but she makes a jolly pleasant kind of living."

"Did she send any messages?"

"Yes. I'll tell you them in a minute. She has kept herself pretty well informed about us all. That lame girl at the little corner shop has been her special correspondent. If we'd only had the wit we could have found Jimbo any time, only I thought that if she let anybody know where she was, she would have written to Agatha or old Ma Gallus. She is still convinced that she did right in getting away and keeping away. She knew all about your entanglement with the Bowden family."

"Did she?" There must have been a tinge of consternation in my voice, for he grimaced at me.

"She did. And she was simply bubbling over with

approval. She spoke of you like a mother speaking of her idiot boy, all maternal and pitying and proud."

"Is she happy?"

"Happy isn't the word. She's as radiant as ever she was. She has a touch of the saint about her these days."

"A touch of the saint?"

"Yes, why not? I don't mean she has turned religious. But there's a kind of placid assurance about her. She's found whatever it was she was meant to find. I don't know what it is. It may be her damned painting. It may be the illusion that she caught some special kind of right to contentment when she bolted from holy matrimony with Frank Peyton. I simply don't know. But she has some kind of inner light. She's spent seven years in some kind of static world, and been able to find herself."

"What did she say?"

"About you? She's still in love with you, if that's any consolation."

"In love?"

"Sounds like a novelette, doesn't it? Or a poem by Adelaide Anne Proctor. 'The Story of the Faithful Soul.' But she isn't a bit like that, really."

"But she didn't actually say. . . ."

"Of course she didn't. But I asked her to marry me and come out to India when I go."

"And she turned you down!"

"Very much so. She's done with all that, she says, whatever 'all that' may mean. I hinted as delicately as I could that 'all that' needn't enter into the contract, that all I wanted was to pick up the threads again, and have her near me, and be like we used to be. But she was as firm as a little rock. I lost my temper with her once. I knew I would. I told her that she was nothing but a packet of third-rate vanity, and always had been, vanity and pure vulgar funk. I said that when she bolted from Prosperity Street it was only because she wouldn't face the prospect of youth and happiness turning into middle-

aged complacency, and hadn't the pluck to change herself from a girl to a woman. She admitted it. She said she'd never denied it, and that was what she had told you in her letter. She had always known that she hadn't the kind of temperament that was needed if she had to change herself with every change of social environment—or some tosh of that kind. It wasn't any use being angry, she was too idiotically sane about the whole business. But she told me to tell you that she is glad that things are going so well with you, and that she knows you'll be happy with Florence, and that she will always feel that she is sharing your triumphs."

"Was that all?"

"Isn't it enough? What did you expect?"

"I don't know. I thought, perhaps, she might have written, or that she might be coming home."

"Home! How could she come home? Where she is, is home to her. She's like me, she carries her home under her hat. What's the use of being an ass about things, Dogsboddy? I know you, you sentimental fool. I bet you are saying 'Where the heart is, there the home is also,' and feeling all pathetic and pitiful. The truth is that you've messed things up so badly that you have to make the same decision all over again. If you like to cut your tin-pot career and break faith with the Bowden girl and go out to Joan, you could start afresh. She's finished with 'all that,' but not where you are concerned. You and she could pick up the threads again, I don't doubt. But you won't do it. She'll never come back to England unless she has to come for some concrete reason. And she's wise. She was always wise. Why should she come back? She has her work and she likes living quietly. And she has her friends. Don't let us forget that. Her seven years haven't been lonely, any more than our seven years have been lonely. Only she has chosen a few decent people of her own kind, while we've run about cultivating the useful men and the busy men and the wealthy men, and the

influential men—and their women. We have our reward, old son. You're by way of being a rising light and I'm being paid fat fees for designing imposing buildings to house infant schools and bureaucrats and bank clerks. I'd chuck the whole thing to-morrow and spend my life like Wordsworth in a cottage, if Jimbo would only join me. In the balance she outweighs them all, these laurels and tributes and the jolly flesh-pots. But *you* won't. You're not made that way. What you want is to run about reforming things, lecturing people, cutting a figure so that you won't be ashamed of the tuppenny-ha'penny clerk you once were. I don't blame you, Frank. We are what we are."

I brooded over his outburst of moralized analysis for a moment or two.

"But why should having Joan mean sacrificing the other things?" I protested. "Why should it ever have meant that? Surely. . . ."

"Because she was clear witted enough to see that the kind of satisfactions she would give would clash with the kind of satisfactions the other things give. I don't suppose she reasoned it out. It must have been a kind of instinct. If you think you could persuade her to take the place of Florence Bowden, you're mistaken. She simply wouldn't waste her time that way. Personally I think you'd be an ass if you kicked up your heels now and tried to get back to anything like the old idyllic business. You've gone too far. You've lost your taste for the simplicities, if you ever had it. But there you are! I'm Quixotic enough to tell you that if you have the pluck to cut adrift now you'll find Joan more amenable where you are concerned than she was with me. On the money you've made you and she could make a life worth living somewhere on the South of the Alps. I don't suppose the Bowden girl would break her heart after the first shock of being politely jilted."

"But, Sinbad. . . ."

He rose and stretched himself, as if we had been discussing something of no import.

"Yes, I know all the buts. You can't do it, can you? Where we made the first mistake, Frank, was in supposing that we would be able to accumulate satisfactions, as if they were coins or counters. It can't be done. You can't have things both ways, you know. You can't add the responsibilities of Smith Square to the freedoms of Prosperity Street, and you can't have the simplicities and the sophistications together. Where are you dining?"

"I'm dining out and going to a theater. Will you come?"

"No clothes. And, besides, I want to think."

I had a sudden fit of quite ridiculously real envy.

"Damn it, man, haven't you had time enough to think all the way back! It's I who want to think."

He took my splenetic outburst in his usual good-humored way.

"What you want to do, Frank, is not to think," he told me.

§ 3

But I thought to some purpose during the weeks that followed. Florence found me a lover to be humored, and she was skilful enough to alternate between what even then I knew to be a frankly sensual appeal and a more subtle concentration upon the hopes which we were building upon our forthcoming severance from the life of Headley. She did not, I think, suspect that my irritability and my moods of abstraction were due to the new actuality of Joan, and attributed them partly to the reaction from the strain and excitements of the past year and partly to a quite natural desire to exchange the rather uncongenial company of those who assembled in the Bowden dining-room for that of men and women more my own intellectual kin.

I took her to visit the little house in Prosperity Street,

hoping that her presence in the familiar rooms would destroy some of their magic, but their magic had gone, with or without her presence. As we turned the corner I knew that this was a mean street, like any other mean street, and when Ma Gallus, if anything fatter than when I had first known her, welcomed us I knew that the house meant as little to me as any other house in which commonplace people lived out their commonplace lives. It was with new and less kindly eyes that I saw Garrick Gallus and his wife, for he was becoming a prating bore and she a tedious female buffoon. Peter had told them of his visit to Joan and Ma Gallus was tactlessly voluble about our old relationship. "Like Romeo and Juliet, only not so high flown, they were," she told Florence, and Pa Gallus informed us that "there's nothing half so sweet in life as Love's young dream—Thomas Moore." Florence liked them and dilated to me during our journey across the town on the superior virtues of unpretentious domesticity compared with the false poise of so many of the homes with which she was acquainted.

"What we must do, Frank," she said, "is to try and preserve that, in spite of being disgustingly rich."

"Shall we be disgustingly rich?"

"Well, we shan't be exactly poor, shall we? I don't see why people shouldn't be contented even if they are aspiring in other ways. I mean, it isn't as if we were what you'd call socially ambitious. I know we'll have to give a lot of our home life away to other people."

"Give it away?"

"Yes. Receptions, and dinners, and crushes and all that kind of affair. But I don't see why we shouldn't have our own very private life together. We'll have to make a sanctuary of our bedroom, Frank."

She pressed my arm at that, as if to convey some particularly glowing significance.

"What I want to avoid is growing into a kind of chocolate-guzzling snob and letting you grow into a

pompous prig. It won't be easy, you know. I sometimes think, Frank, that p'raps we're making a mistake, after all—getting married."

There was a stir at my heart, which was dangerously like hope.

"In what way?" I asked, a shade constrainedly.

"I don't know. I only think you may be disappointed with me later on."

"Supposing you are disappointed with me?" I countered, seeing with great clearness at that moment how little I really cared whether she was to be disappointed or not.

"I shan't be that. I know you too well."

"Um. You're not very flattering, are you?"

"Oh, my dear, I only meant that I know how you'll play up. But it's going to be a test for me, you see. When you begin to dominate the great world as you used to dominate this place, and to meet all the really big people, where shall I be? I'm only really the ordinary article in an unusually pretty box. There's no real guarantee that I'll wear well. I wish I had the pluck to do what that little art girl did, and bolt for it. I'm a bit frightened, you know. . . ."

I protested that she had no need to fear.

"I know all that," she answered, "but it doesn't make any difference. You can't guess half the things that have begun to worry me the nearer we get to the great adventure. For one thing, I'm. . . ."

"I know exactly what you are," I told her, and tried to change her mood and my own with the light-hearted non-sense that young people on the brink of an abyss use to veil the danger which threatens without defining itself. She was not to be jockeyed out of her purpose.

"No, seriously, Frank, if you wanted to be free of me, I should. . . ."

"But I don't want to be free of you. We're going to escape together," I said.

"Escape from what?"

"From the past, from everything, from ourselves."

And, even as I said it, I knew myself for no better than her besotted brother, who dared not go to sleep in case the goldfish in his diseased imagination pursued and overtook him. I was not marrying a wife, not even marrying a mistress. I was using Florence and her loveliness and her comradely affection as another might have used a cabinet of drugs.

"You mean," she said, "from the Florence and the Frank who aren't ourselves. We must try to escape from them."

"I say, Florence," I almost cried aloud in my eagerness to drag her with me down a new pathway that seemed to open up before me, "suppose we do really escape? Suppose we cut all the things we've talked about doing, and bury ourselves away somewhere together?"

She laughed gently at me.

"What a dreamer you are, Frank. We couldn't. I should go all broody, like an old hen, and you'd start to moult for lack of air. No! We're going to do the thing we're made for. Why, you'd be miserable if you couldn't go on with your grand schemes for putting the world to rights. You'd die without an audience, you know you would. And so would I. It is only that comic Darby and Joan atmosphere that has made us a bit soppy. We could no more live on love in a cottage than poor old George Lawton could go back to being a clerk or whatever he was when you first knew him. It's all very well for people like the Agnew girl, who are made that way, but we want stimulation and reaction. We are the doing type, not the placid, enduring type. I found that out about myself when I was sent to school in Belgium. And you must have found it out about yourself when you struggled to get out of that little street. Wait until we are really clear of all the old associations and we'll be all right, my dear. We're a pair of misfits just yet. We've outgrown Headley and Bowden-

ism and we haven't had a chance to grow into London and Peytonism."

Her assurance that we should grow into what she had called London and Peytonism re-created in me my own older zest for such growth. I saw, even as the Bowden brougham took us through the streets of Headley, a vision of Florence and myself in spacious rooms receiving as our guests gracious and pleasant people who shared our values of life and with whom we had coöperated in constructive work to ensure for those values an ever widening recognition. At that moment I was fretted by no contrasted vision of Joan and her simpler concentration upon the more primal values. After all, I was a man amongst men, and had neither the right nor the real desire to demand that the halcyon relationships of adolescence should persist throughout the adult years. In the effulgent emanations of Florence, and her eupeptic readiness to take life as a game of strenuous embattlements, I was able to see Joan and her less challenging radiance as a Kate Greenaway illustration would have seemed against a nude by Etty.

§ 4

After the rather terrible Christmas celebrations, during which we all pretended to be enjoying ourselves in the traditional English manner, and Mr. Bowden became daily more like a cheap imitation of Dickens's Mr. Wardle, until an attack of liver smote him and he was deflated into an irritable version of his normal self, there was an interregnum of frenzied preparation for the wedding. Florence and her mother acquired a habit of disappearing after breakfast and were no more seen of men until tea, leaving my host and myself to eat our luncheon at the Club, where, as a prospective bridegroom, I became the target for much coarse-tongued chaff, passing in that society for the very cream of wit.

It perturbed me, at times, to discover that my recep-

tion of the idiosyncrasies of the people about me was no longer appreciative, was, indeed, barely tolerant. Once I had savored these jesting fellows as a child might have savored a display of clowns in a circus ring. Now they aroused in me an impatience which grew dangerously near to positive detestation. It was, I was well aware, from me and not from them that virtue had departed. I was no longer able to approve life as a grotesque and thrilling adventure. I was compelled to arraign it as a futile succession of insignificant incidents complicated by as futile a succession of changing relationships. I comforted myself then with the assurance that my change of attitude was due to nothing but an increasing sensibility, accentuated by my emotional grief for the loss of the idyll which I had once shared with Joan. Looking back after all these years I cannot sustain that comfort. It may be that I, like my host, was afflicted by the Christmas feasting. But, whether my malaise was spiritual, esthetic or merely physical, I approached my marriage in no mood of singing happiness. I was heavy with doubts and discomforted by a fear that neither to Florence nor myself was I being honest. And yet I knew that my reveries about Joan were not such as to make me, with any sincerity, wish that it was she that I was about to marry.

When I was in the presence of Florence herself, however separated from her by surrounding others, doubts and fear were dissipated. When we were alone my own ardency took fire from her. Whatever my own moods, she could not suspect, she did not suspect, that my desire for her was in any way tinged by a reluctance, however impalpable to make irrevocable the tie between us. But I knew, deep in my consciousness, that either the marriage was wrong, or all the old dreams of perfect unity between wedded lovers had been idle aspirations. And yet, never had a unity ostensibly promised such perfection of unity, for all that divided us was a sickly and boyish fancy for a mere ghost of an old love. Even the differences of taste

and habit, of mental preoccupations and psychological tendencies, which are, one supposes, the causes of most unsuccessful matings, were, in our case, not too strongly marked in us and were, by virtue of her power of assimilation, becoming rapidly less real.

But I feared that when we came together a shadowy third would stand beside us to restrain my senses from a complete assent, and the visitant, I well knew, would not be the living Joan, but only her younger wraith, unpossessable herself, but robbing the possession of any rival of whatever fulfillment it might have promised.

The day before the wedding my morbid introspection was of such intensity that I almost abandoned the commitments which held me and fled to the real Joan, there to search for the Joan who had once embodied for my younger self every promise and every gift that ever the urgent teleology of the race had made to its ingenuous and unsuspecting victims. But that which held me was a dual wisdom. Not in the new Joan would the younger Joan hide, and even were she there, waiting, like some beauty of the fairy tales, to be conjured back to actuality by my need, between her and me would come now and for ever the appealing, the desirable form of Florence. Like poor Benvolio, I wanted both Scholastica and the Countess, and either alone could but accentuate my need for the other. I saw clearly that a man can never return to the same haven that he left, for once the seas have been sailed and new ports entered all is changed for him by the mere perspective of his experience, and the simplest and most familiar things suffer the gravest transfiguration.

Sitting here, in this great room, recovering as best I may the emotions of three decades ago, I could moralize like Martin Tupper about the mental states which succeeded each other in that still boyish mind, but I do young Frank Peyton an injustice. I was not, after all, so obsessed by Florence and Joan as I now pretend to

imagine. There were all about me the manifold distractions of a life in which these two never truly entered. I remember the bachelor's dinner with George Lawton in the Chair, and I recall that as he and Peter and I crossed to Peter's rooms in the small hours of what was actually my wedding morning, we went to the offices of my old newspaper and dissected with Ralph Simms the edition just off the press. And it was in that interregnum, when Florence was frenziedly finishing her bridal shopping, and in which I have pictured myself like some Byronic hero, that Fenton, who sat for North Headley, Wexminster and I made the rough draft of the amending Bill to the Companies Act which became later a definite step in my political career. It was, too, in that interregnum that George and I, in our new relationship as the partners in Lawton, Peyton & Company, negotiated the purchase of several acres of the Wexminster property which touched the fringes of Headley, the resale of which the following year for conversion into the great railway depôt which now stands there, was one of George's most successful and flamboyant coups.

By all the canons of romantic fiction I should have been incapable of anything but a concentrated passion for Florence or a soul sickness for Joan, but life is not like that. My private emotional states were really, I now see, the preoccupation only of those hours which were not filled by the pressing demands of the material interests to which, for good or ill, I had allied myself.

But it would have been different, I know now, as I felt then, had I been married seven years earlier from the little house in Prosperity Street.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

§ I

THE BARBARIC CUSTOMS of our tribe demanded that our wedding should be an ornate ritual followed by a feast, and we endured both with what simulation of gravity we could achieve when everything conspired either to amuse or to annoy us.

Peter had repented his original intention to leave for India before my marriage, and it was he who opened two bottles of ale as I finished tying my silver-gray tie and slipped into my coat and waistcoat.

"All the best best-men administer ale," he assured me as I expressed a doubt whether the worthy vicar of Headley who was to officiate would appreciate the flavor of hops in my responses. "Besides, we need it after that absurd orgy of fizz last night." He held the amber liquid approvingly to the light before handing my glass to me. "I must say, Dogsboddy, that you made a good enough breakfast."

We had feasted off kidneys and bacon at half-past eight, and it was now half-past ten. The ceremony was exactly an hour in the future.

"Is my kit all right?" I asked, like any girl.

"Not too bad. Those trousers are a bit of an emetic."

"What's the matter with 'em?"

"When I told you to order a shepherd's plaid check I didn't mean you to copy old Winterbottom, the bookie."

I had a momentary panic.

"I say, Sinbad, shall I change 'em?"

"Oh, they're not as bad as that. They'll do. 'Shouldn't be surprised if the cab horses shy at 'em though. Well, many happy returns of the day!"

How often had we stood thus, I thought, nodding to

each other over the rims of glasses—and how seldom would we so stand after to-day? At that moment I was not sure that the real and abiding thing in life was not my friendship for Peter Wass. No wife, surely, could attain with me to anything approaching the intimacy of thought and speech which he and I had shared, nor could that intimacy survive the intrusion of a wife, even if he had not been about to sever himself from me by the length of two continents. It was odd, how little I had thought of him when I had wooed Joan, whom he had loved, or when I had wooed Florence, whom he still, I knew, distrusted and disliked.

Celebrating him so in my mind, I said nothing as I gesticulated at him with my glass and swallowed the cool, bitter liquor.

"That's a damn sight better than the 'blushful Hippocrene,'" he remarked. "And now we have forty minutes to kill until the cab comes. What shall we do? Have another bottle? Better not, perhaps. We'll have to swig fizz again after the ceremony. How do you feel about things?"

"A bit strung up."

"That's a good sign. I say, we shall feel a couple of asses, hanging about the altar, waiting for the blushing bride. I'll bet you a level half-crown that I count more white waistcoats than you count check trousers between taking station and the entry of old Bowden and his girl. . . ."

And, as we stood fumbling with our glove buttons and looking as solemn as the Apostles on the pulpit panels, it was in that asinine competition that we indulged.

There was a stir as the congregation rose and the organ pealed out.

"Thirty-one, including old Bowden," whispered my best-man.

"Fifteen," I muttered, my eyes on Florence, who seemed to be making no progress at all from the far end of the church.

Peter gave a quiet chuckle.

"You've forgotten your own—and they're drowning the organ. . . ."

"Shut up," I said, and took an impulsive step forward. He seized my arm.

"Steady. Take the time from me. It isn't the first ceremony we've worked together, you know. Now!"

There was, as it seemed to me, an eternity of absolute and complete silence, in which Florence and I stood and gazed at each other across infinities of space, while time stood still.

Noise returned, and the faces of the ranked congregation came back to actuality. I was by the side of the unfamiliar figure in white. A voice said "Dearly beloved . . . " and I concentrated all my faculties ready for the moment when my own voice would be required.

§ 2

She was by my side at the great table in the banquet hall of the Central Hotel, smiling down to this salute and that. Old William Bowden was incredibly my father-in-law. We were eating steadily through an unwanted meal called by courtesy a wedding breakfast. In a moment or two somebody would be toasting us. I should be replying. Everyone seemed flatteringly interested in us both. To me it all seemed extraordinarily unimportant and meaningless. I awaited anxiously the time of our release when we should drive to the railway station. It was strange that I should know all these people. How different they were, from Garrick Gallus, separated from me by the length of the main table, to the Duke of Wexminster, a condescending guest to whom the affair must have seemed one of the unpleasant penalties of his Presidency of the local political association. It would have been better, I remember thinking, if there had only been some half dozen of us, friends together. . . .

I found myself almost automatically tending my bride,

solicitously passing her condiments or summoning waiters.

Not until we had changed our clothes and had waved a last farewell to the capering and shouting maniacs on the railway platform did I recover a sense of personal identity. We sat back in two corner seats facing each other. Florence shook confetti from her ringleted hair and I brushed the clinging stuff from my shoulders. There was no actual embarrassment, but a slight constraint between us. We had made love too fervently during the wooing to feel any real strangeness in our new relationship. But I was conscious of a new response to her loveliness, a quieter response more thoroughly fulfilling than had been any more passionate emotion of our betrothal. She looked across at me, with her frank gaze, and a wry smile contorted for a moment those tender and provocative lips.

"We've done it now, Frank!" she said.

I nodded ruefully, in mock concern at our common catastrophe.

"You'll have to make the best of me," I said.

"I shall make nothing of you, Frank. I'm going to do all the 'giving-away.' I'm your woman from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer. What a shame to spoil that solemn ceremony by junketing and speeches. We should have gone straight away, by ourselves, to our cottage. What time do we get there? Five o'clock? It'll be dusk, but we'll be able to see the sea."

We were going to a cottage lost in the duneland of the Northwest coast.

"I hope you'll like the place, Flo. It's very desolate and quiet."

"I shall love it."

The train had rattled us out of the industrial outskirts of Headley and we were speeding across a belt of moorland. I felt a great surge of gratitude swirl over me,

gratitude for I knew not what, save that life was treating me well, and that here with me was a good comrade, able to take fire at my enthusiasms and to comfort me in my depressions. It was nothing at that moment that she was an ardent and lovely girl, clad in a grace that had so often made me breathless with sheer impersonal admiration of its charm. Had she been ugly, deformed, grotesque I would have cherished her no less fervently. My doubts of yesterday were gone, and gone, too, my thoughts of Joan. I crossed the narrow compartment and took her in my arms. She raised her face to mine and our lips met in a kiss which, as none other had done, sealed us less as lovers than as sworn friends.

§ 3

The old dame who was our sole servitor brought in our candlesticks and bade us good-night, with a kind of sympathetic leer. We heard her shuffling footsteps go from stair to stair.

"She's a kindly soul, really," said my wife.

"Did I doubt it!"

"Your face did. You have an expressive face, Frank. You should have been an actor. You have the sensitive mouth of an actor. That walk has made me tired."

We had been to the verge of the dunes to watch the incoming tide.

"It wasn't the walk," I assured her. "It is the strain of this morning."

"This morning . . . was it only this morning? It seems a year ago, doesn't it. Frank. . . ."

"Yes?"

"I'm an awful fool, I know, but would you mind not coming up to bed—for a little while. I've turned shy."

She was wonderfully blushing, I saw.

"Of course I won't. I'm not too full of aplomb myself."

She laughed at that.

"Light a candle for me. Queer, being in an old-fashioned place with only oil lamps and candles."

We fixed our eyes on the guttering wick until it took flame, but they met as we looked up.

"I'm not really shy, now, Frank. Come up with me. You're a good sort."

"I'm not half good enough," I told her, with more sincerity than I cared to put into my voice.

I extinguished the oil lamp, and we stood for a moment in the shadows which surrounded the little yellow candle-flame.

"The worst of it is," said Florence, "that soon it won't be an adventure for either of us, going to bed together." She gripped my hand with a sudden little pressure. "But you'll always love me, won't you, always and always?"

"Always and always," I said.

"Come on, my dear, before I grow shy again," she whispered, and drew me towards the door. As we went up the narrow twisted staircase I felt that we had successfully converted the sacrament of Holy Matrimony into something as definitely human and romantic as an illicit amour, and I felt that with Florence it would never lose that adventurous savor.

It was with a sigh of absolute contentment that she settled her head at last for sleep, her dark hair falling all about my shoulders, and with a contented sigh that she opened her big eyes when next morning my kiss awakened her.

§ 4

From that winter honeymoon in the wind-swept sand-hills, where the days passed without our solitude being disturbed by the intrusion of any human being demanding entertainment, or more consideration than was the need of our aged cottage keeper and the village tradesmen, we emerged into the full tide of that social and political life which was to sweep us forward through the

years. The dear intimacy of those few weeks had somehow composed us both. I was essentially well-poised, a healthy male with every need, primal and complex, fully satisfied. Florence was as essentially well-poised in her rather different way. The friendship of Wexminster and a few other members of the circle we entered and our command of material resources, added, as they were, to my rising celebrity as both a writer and a parliamentarian, enabled us to take up immediately a mode of life which many another pair of provincial adventurers such as we would have been compelled, for the earlier years, at least, of their progress merely to strive towards.

It was a full life that I led, for George Lawton gave me no excuse for deserting the partnership which, almost by its own momentum, seemed to develop into a flourishing business, with offices which grew with each year and a rapidly increasing staff of assorted experts. Parliament and my books would have been adequate employments, and the need for attendances at the office of Lawton, Peyton & Company, and of the newspaper group, took what little personal leisure I would have had. It was not until I was offered office some years later that we sold the Headley papers to the Hillsdun brothers, and in those first years they maintained a hold on my interest.

Not only my personal concerns were arresting in their varied intensity, but the events in the greater world had a similar quality. The Boer War and the death of the old Queen, the sudden launching of Chamberlain's fiscal campaign, the land-slide election, which changed the whole face of political life, the coming of cheaper and cheaper books and more clamorous periodicals, the granting of charters to the Northern Universities, the almost abrupt triumph of the motor-car after a doubtful period when its makers could not tear themselves from the designs of the horsed carriages of their previous experience, the realization, very soon justified, that flying was a human possibility, the steady growth of the menace of

European war—through all these changes and progressions Florence and I moved, serenely enough but with that slightly feverish activity which was the mark of our generation.

Looking back I see her in a succession of dissolving pictures, sparkling at the head of my table, dominating little groups at official receptions, gracing my platforms at public meetings, reading my manuscripts over the fire of my study in Smith Square, combing out her dark hair before the pier-glass after her quite useless and decorative maid had left her, lying very still and white after the births of our two boys, imitating music-hall performers in the cabin of Wexminster's yacht, returning flushed and thoroughly happy from the races, or sitting, her bright eyes dancing with pleasure, at the theater. I see her, too, presiding over the small table on which supper was always laid for me on my late return from the House. She would come down in a dressing-gown if it were unusually late or would be sitting toasting her toes with her skirt drawn back over the round knees of which, for some absurd reason, she remained always inordinately proud, and would minister to me as I told my tale to her of the day's triumph and rebuffs. She discovered quite early what were my favorite dishes outside the scope of the conventional menus of our class, and we would regale ourselves a little guiltily on unorthodox but succulent dainties.

Sometimes, as all people do, we had quarrels, fierce little tiffs, or even more lasting sulky fits, that were composed in laughter or by bursts of savage talk to sentimental reconciliations.

George and Agatha Lawton took a house in town, and provided us with a second circle of friendships, for they would not brave the traps of etiquette with which they imagined our social relationships to be beset. Florence and Agatha became greatly attached to each other, I fancy because of their absorbing interest in the children.

The Inebriates' Home failed to cure Bert Bowden of his little weakness and he died, rather nastily, when we had been married about a year, and the deaths of Florence's parents in the fifth and sixth years of our marriage, made us disgustingly wealthy. Old Bowden's business had expanded rapidly under the stimulus of army contracts during the Boer War, and he had been astute enough to attack several new export markets which his competitors had neglected. After the estate was wound up Florence found herself the inheritor of something approaching a quarter of a million. She bought Sunnington Manor and gave me the deeds as a birthday present and, not to be outdone, I gave her a yacht which was a replica of Westminster's "Flying Foam." Almost before we knew it we were established as representative pillars of a caste to which neither of us had any real affinity, but so inevitable had seemed the quick progress to such a state that none, least of all ourselves, questioned our right to be so regarded.

Occasionally I found myself wondering what Peter Wass would say when he returned from his work in the East and found us so established, and occasionally I found myself wondering what Joan was doing in Rome, and how life was treating her. I pictured her now, in middle age, as a rather faded and placid Englishwoman in a not altogether friendly setting of Latins. Once or twice, when I had lost my temper with some freak of Florence, or when Florence had taken umbrage at some whimsy of mine, I would nibble the end of my penholder and contrast my unsympathetic housemate with the wonderful partner that Joan would have been had she not left me or had I had the courage to adventure all on the hope of discovering her first hiding-place. But more often I would survey our boy and girl love-making with a kind of ultra-adult tolerance, and be glad that destiny, with the aid of George Lawton, had directed my life from the crude simplicities of Prosperity Street to the complex

activities which drew me each morning from Smith Square to take my place in the endless quadrille of purposeful magnates and self-consciously constructive statesmen.

And then, without warning, I found myself looking again into Joan's eyes and listening to her voice, and the middle-aged complacent man of affairs stood aside to make way for a love-lorn boy who came hurrying back through time to assert his right to the body of Frank Gerrard Peyton.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

§ 1

SUNNINGTON MANOR, which was to be our country home, stood within a walk of the sea, and was as little like the conventional English country house as any place of its kind that I have known. It lacked, for example, anything that could be called shooting, there was no pack of hounds within fifty miles, and the sportsman who stayed there had to be content with very crude fishing. I attained to the leisure and wealth of country life too late to be a genuine shot, but every year since my return to Parliament Florence and I had gone North in August to Wexminster's moors, making the visit an opportunity for touring my constituency and addressing one or two village meetings and a garden fête which the Duke held annually before the twelfth at the Towers. Wexminster never married—I fancy there was a rather close understanding between him and Martha Lothbury, although the Earl of Lothbury and the Duke of Wexminster remained good friends—and Mary Marvin, the sister, played *chatelaine* at the Towers. Between Mary and Florence there was always a kind of veiled and quiet hostility, and when we

had taken over Sunnington, Florence seized the chance of crying off what we had come to regard as an annual commitment to the Towers. She came North with me for the garden fête and spent a week running round my constituents, but went South again before the shooting party had assembled, on the plea of getting her own place in order for the Autumn, leaving me as "odd man out" to the party. Our two boys had not then gone to their preparatory school, and I looked forward to a week at Sunnington with them before the Autumn Session opened.

It was never the habit at the Towers to regard me as seriously a gun, and when I had displayed my ineptitude on the first day, and had justified the newspaper references to the popular member for Wexminster who preferred to shoot over part of his own constituency to going to Scotland, they left me out of account. I spent most of my time in the old library, overtaking arrears of work.

August that year was exceptionally hot, and it was a positively broiling day which tempted me to accept an invitation to run over to the neighboring spa of Waylinboro with my hostess. She had to fulfill some long-standing engagement to preside over a meeting of some girls' club or another, a kind of congress, I imagine, of similar institutions from all over the county to which the presence of the seriously-minded niece of one Duke and sister of another was supposed to add a peculiar grace.

I had cried off the butts on the plea of wanting to work, and had deserted all ideas of justifying my plea under the attraction of an easy chair on the terrace. Mary Marvin came singing round the corner of the house with her arms full of cut blooms. We had known each other for a dozen years, and, whatever antagonism there was between her and Florence, between her and me there was nothing but a pleasant friendliness. It may have been her liking for my early books which had to a great extent caused her brother to ensure to me the reversion of his old constitu-

ency. Time had treated her not unkindly, and now, some years past her climacteric, she retained a youthful grace of figure and an unlined face beneath hair which was the more charming for being gray. Only the habitual primness of her gowning and a certain set to her rather thin lips betrayed her as the too austere virgin that the younger set found her.

"Hello, lazy-bones," she greeted me. "This isn't like you."

"It's too nice a morning for work. What lovely flowers. You look like Flora from some old color print."

"I always like to do my own flowers. Why not come into Waylinboro with me, if you feel like sunning yourself? I'm using an open car."

"You don't want me to address your precious girls, do you?" I said suspiciously.

She allayed my fears by a shake of her head.

"No. You'd have to amuse yourself until evening. I only thought perhaps you'd like the run. They give you a tolerable luncheon at the Spa Hotel, and there are heaps of antique shops to look at."

"I'd love it," I assured her. "When do we start?"

"Half-an-hour from now."

"Good. I shan't need a coat, shall I? But, by jove, I shall need some money. Have you any?"

"Yes, plenty. I'll bring some down with me. Will ten pounds do?"

"Ample. I'll make the cheque out while I'm waiting for you."

"Make it out to Jerry, will you?"

We entered the house together and half-an-hour later were tucked into the back of an open car. Mary was a little peevish about the attacks which the Chancellor of the Exchequer was making upon Dukes in general and Wexminster's forebears in particular. Reform of the House of Lords was very much in the air. Some of the more timid of the Tories had already taken fright, it

seemed, and were preparing for a regime of wholesale confiscation.

"Look at Percy Lothbury," said my companion, nodding vaguely to where Lothbury Hall lay hidden behind its well timbered park. "He's selling the Titian and the Reubens, and I shouldn't be surprised if the eighteenth century portraits went."

"But surely that's rather premature," I protested.

"Percy's idea is that if he sells now he'll get a price, but if he waits until everybody begins to sell, he won't."

"The Hall will seem a bit denuded, won't it, without the Lothbury treasures?"

"They'll have to rehang everything. Martha is having the Titian and the Reubens copied by a really first-rate person, out of sheer sentiment."

"Then the deal is actually through?"

"Oh, yes. Months ago. Some American collector has bought 'em. I don't know what he's giving, but quite a fortune. Martha is ragin' mad about it. She says she can't conceive anyone selling pictures when they could sell a few acres of dirt. But land fetches nothing nowadays compared with pictures. I don't know why some of the Headley millionaires didn't buy 'em for the town."

"I know—because I know the Headley millionaires."

"Of course you do. So does Jerry. Are they all appallingly rich?"

"Not really. They are well backed, of course. I mean the town couldn't, I suppose, produce a genuine millionaire, but it could produce two or three manufacturers with half a million each, and a dozen or two with a couple of hundred thousands. It's in their business, of course. Most of them were like me, you know. Caught by a tide."

She repeated the phrase as an interrogation.

"Yes. Quite positively that. Money is an awfully capricious thing nowadays. A man can be as deliberate as he pleases and as gifted as God makes him, but if he

isn't in the right place at the right moment, and ready to take advantage of the currents, he won't succeed. Another man, with no real desire to make money, may find himself attracting it as a magnet attracts steel filings. Even if my lamented father-in-law hadn't left Florence a small fortune, I should be quite wealthy, and twenty years ago I was living from hand to mouth on a salary not much bigger than that of your head chauffeur."

"But your books did that, surely."

"Books! My publishers' cheques don't pay my tailor's bill. What did it was my being in the direct line of a new development and being forced by a rather dynamic friend to apply my talent for journalism in the new and fashionable way—that and a kind of pettifogging ambition not to remain obscure. You know, don't you, just how your uncle helped us?"

"You mean when you came to ask him to help to buy the 'Chronicle,' and he did? You've often told me about that."

"Well, if *he* hadn't helped, somebody else would have bought the paper, and I should probably be some kind of journalistic hack to this day. I certainly shouldn't have been motoring into Waylinboro with Wexminster's sister."

She flatteringly laughed at that.

"I don't suppose you'd have been any kind of hack at all. In any event the Bowden money would have given you a career."

"But that wouldn't have been available. If we hadn't persuaded your uncle to come in, people like Bowden would never have been socially aware of my humble existence. That is really what I mean. Once I was dragged into the stream I simply couldn't avoid accumulating money and kudos and everything else that I suppose I have accumulated, unless, of course, I had been foolish and let myself be drowned, as it were."

"Drowned?"

"Oh, yes. Some people get caught by the money-tide and drown, or get dashed on the rocks."

She took the metaphor.

"Or listen to the singing of the Sirens. I see. Rather a good thing for us that you could swim, you know."

"Us?"

"The party. You've done wonders, one way and another. Of course you're not far from office, now, are you? And you are quite young, really."

"I'm not exactly aged," I admitted.

"You're a queer lot, you new men," she said, with something unflatteringly like a sigh. "Very mixed. You're quite the best of 'em."

"I always thought so," I positively grinned back at her.

"You would. What I meant was that the new men in the old days insisted upon marrying one of us. You people don't worry. We have to take you as we find you. You simply don't want to be absorbed. You fall in love and marry. You don't run about looking for helpful wives, do you?"

"Some of us don't."

"I believe Jerry is right. We're really living in the middle of a bloodless revolution. All the old values are going."

"It'll be worse before it's better," I cheerfully assured her. "Wait until we have a big European bust-up. That'll change things out of all recognition."

"It's bound to come, I suppose?"

"They tell me that you could safely bet on the very month. They do, in Germany. We're running down to the end of an epoch. Fin-de-siècle was a premature dawn. It's going to be awkward for us, who were bred to the older world."

"When will it come?"

"Not for a year or two—half a decade, perhaps."

She pondered the future in silence, and when she

emerged from her reverie it was to ask me where I would like to be dropped.

"Drop me anywhere in the town. I'm only going to laze about the antique shops."

It was outside the biggest of them that the car deposited me. I stood with bared head and saw her taken out of my sight round a corner, one of the queer new men at that moment quite consciously amazed at his own progression to her friendship.

I wished, as I gazed into the big window before me, that Florence were with me. That indefinable understanding which grows with marriage had long since established between us a bond which made itself felt as the more real when circumstances had conspired temporarily to loosen it. Without her I was like a man who had forgotten some accustomed article of toilet, who had come into the streets without his walking-stick, or who had omitted from the careful storing of his pockets a cigarette case or a bunch of keys. There was no real sense of deprivation. There was merely a vague feeling that I was not equipped for the day's adventurings.

Even as I stared my fill at the motley collection of "pieces" in the window, my mind concerned itself with the odd stage to which my relationships with Florence had come. She was no longer essentially a stimulant, even if she had not by usage quite degenerated to a sedative. She gave me now a sense not of vitality and passionate zest in being alive, but an assurance of comfort in our being together. Even her beauty, I caddishly pondered, had become only an associational satisfaction. She was still beautiful in a more mature way, I realized, placing myself for a moment quite detachedly outside the circle of her personal witchery upon me. She was less lithe of figure, more rotund of face. Her hair, its ringlets long banished by fashion, was, perhaps, a shade less bright to the eye. But she was a creature of remarkable grace and charm. Her unexpected flashes of wit, her per-

petual flow of easy humor, her honest attempts to puzzle out problems which for their own intrinsic sakes did not so much as rouse her tepid interest, her baffling intuition as to the answers to problems which did arouse her interest—these were aspects of her which I could not but celebrate when, as now, I chose to abstract them from the general consciousness of her being which filled my mind.

She was not with me, and it was no use wishing she were, but it occurred to me that I might pander to my sudden mood of uxorious sentimentalism, and fill some of the moments before my luncheon by stepping into the tempting interior of the shop before me and acquiring something which would please her.

The establishment was larger than I had suspected. The door through which I had entered was one of two, the other ostensibly leading into a print and picture shop, which, once the threshold was crossed, was but a section of the interior undivided by any wall or partition from where I stood, a little stupidly, amongst suits of armor and old settles. The whole place, for a wonder, was adequately lighted.

A stern but friendly gentleman, who was more like a County Court Judge than any County Court Judge I have known, advanced towards me, and favored me with what was either a frown just conquered by a smile, or a smile all but submerged beneath an unbanished frown. His assurance was such that the first greeting came from me. It seemed an audacious presumption to wish to become a customer of such a man, but he was gracious, once the conversational ice was broken. He did not so much agree with my opinion that the morning was fine as take a mental note of it without, for the moment, disputing it. Any solicitor for the defendant who might volunteer the contrary opinion would, I felt, receive the same coldly courteous impartiality. Only when I had stammeringly explained my desire to "pick up" some small article of vertu did he expand a little, and then to suggest that I might

like a comfit box which had been used by some long dead courtesan, whose name I forget, and which, he was sure I would agree, was rather absurdly priced at three hundred guineas. Since my sentimentalism had not soared above a pound or two, I did agree that the comfit box was absurdly priced, and had intimated my desire to buy something quite trivial as I was not carrying much money, before he had grasped the ambiguity of my assent.

"My dear Mr. Peyton, your cheque would be quite good enough for us," said he laughingly, as if brushing aside some too preposterous plea from plaintiff's lawyer. His recognition was another of those reminders of my celebrity to which I have never, even now, grown thoroughly accustomed. I saw that if I advanced the alternative plea that I had no cheque book with me he would as lightly brush that aside, and ask merely for my most convenient address. I resigned myself into his hands, and passing over the courtesan's comfit box busied myself with a tray of Italian rings. Florence had an insatiable passion for rings.

We compromised at last on a French perfume ring at a beggarly fifty guineas, but the County Court Bench was well up to its work, and I was soon committed, also, to a small Herring at four times the price, and was only by a strong exertion of my will rejecting His Honor's pressing invitation to consider how well an Atkinson Grimshaw would look in the collection of moderns which I had not the heart to tell him I did not possess. He summoned a dingy-looking person, no doubt his usher, and gave instructions for the dispatch of my two purchases. With a relatively genial assurance that the account should come to me at Wexminster Towers before I went South again, he led me to the door and dismissed me with a dignity which fell just short of patronage.

I bade him good-day, and relenting, perhaps, for his official sternness with so ingenuous a suitor he repeated his own formula of dismissal from his doorstep.

"Ah—good-day, Mr. Peyton," he said.

I stood aside to allow an incoming purchaser to pass through the door which His Honor was holding open for her, but she halted her own steps with mine.

"Don't you know me, Frank?" asked Joan.

§ 2

We must, I suppose, have shaken hands like normal people. We must also have turned our backs upon the judicial antique dealer and walked down the sunlit and thronged street of that fashionable Northern spa without displaying the tumult that was within us. But I cannot, try as I may, remember what happened between the moment of our encounter and the moment when I was seated with her under the trees of the Royal Park, that broad and generous belt of wooded green which sprawls through the center of the town. I am certain that it was not until then that my eyes took their fill of her.

"Gold and pink and cream, she was: but not doll-like or fragile." The gold was there still, unruined, but a tone darker than in the girlish hair that I so well remembered. The pink had gone. She was browned by her years in the Italian sun, but she still had in the new duskiness of her face that hint of cream beneath the over-color which had once so entranced my boyish eyes. I had not remembered how small she was. Her figure had matured, and she was no longer a girl built to the lines of a boy. She was very definitely a woman, and a woman of middle-age, but a woman, even to the eye, whose warmth had been subsumed into some rarer flame than that which burns most of us to hardness or roasts us to a repellent distension.

"You've come back!" I fatuously cried, probably for the fourth or fifth time since our meeting.

"Yes. I've come back. I didn't mean you to know. I thought you'd be in London. I'd forgotten that you might be up here for the Autumn." Her voice was strangely unaltered. I hoped that soon she would laugh,

for I recalled now how her mirth had always seemed to charge her contralto with new significances.

"You never wrote. . . ."

"No. I never wrote, and you never came. . . ."

"But, Joan. . . ."

"I know. I wanted you not to come. And I told you that I wouldn't write again, didn't I? You've done wonderful things, Frank. I followed every step you've taken. I've been very proud of you. You must have been very happy."

"Happy!" I was obsessed with the memory of those dreadful blank days after her leaving me.

"Your progress, your wife, your sons. Surely you've been happy?"

"Perhaps I have been happy."

"How little you've changed. You're not at all the fat, complacent man you ought to be. And yet, you know, you're very different. I suppose I'm different, too."

"Not so very different, Jimbo." There was a spectral Florence between us, laughing at me, in her familiar friendly way. I wished heartily that I had been unhappy. It would have been so much more simple.

Joan sighed and turned her eyes from me to look out over the almost empty park. The poise of her head in profile was not changed by the newer fullness of her throat, the slightly slackened line of her chin. I sat regarding her in silence while all the past seemed to unfold itself. She remained the finest of all my memories and the real woman beside me was as completely now the finest of my realities as the girl had once been.

"Why did you go, Joan?" I asked, trying hard to keep any forced note of poignancy from my lowered voice.

She turned her head again, her honest eyes rebuking me.

"You know why I went, Frank. It would have ended miserably, if I'd stayed. I couldn't have done the things you've done. I should have irked and hindered you. I felt

it then and I've thought it all out so often since. It was only one little bit of you that I really loved, and nothing of me that you really loved."

"Joan!"

"It's true, it's true. You liked my youth, and my body, and my ways. You wouldn't have kept your liking if I'd stayed. I knew it all so clearly when you were so eager about your great schemes." She smiled with a quick impish twinkle. "I couldn't compete with George Lawton, you see."

"But. . . ."

"No. It wasn't jealousy. It was only that I knew, deep down, that I couldn't keep you and our love. And if I'd tried to tell you, you would have overmastered me. You see, my mother's life was always obsessing me. It gave me a kind of sense of . . . of . . . I don't know what."

We were still a decade from the vogue of "inferiority complexes," but I think I grasped without formulation what she meant.

"Don't you think I'd have given up all the rest for you?" I asked, again striving not to allow a note of sentimentality into my words.

"No. I don't. You wouldn't have given anything up for me. You'd have tried, perhaps, but not for long. There was always a queer forceful streak in you, Frank. You were like so many men I've met since, a bundle of incompatible qualities."

"And you, Joan? Have *you* been happy? *Are* you happy?"

"Happy enough. Happier than I ever deserved to be."

"Peter told me . . ."

"Yes, Sinbad. He came and wanted to marry me. Did he tell you that? I almost did. But I couldn't quite. Not even when I knew all about Florence. I've often wondered about Florence. Is she anything like me?"

I had never thought so, but at that moment I saw how like they were.

"Not really. But there is a something. I think it's vitality, or zest, or some abstract thing in you both. She isn't at all like you in type."

There was another silence.

"It's odd how much you've filled my life, Frank. I've lived on the memory of that year. I ran away from you, but I never really escaped you."

"Nor I you."

"Didn't you?" There was nothing satirical in the question. It was all honest eagerness and gladness.

"No. I've lived on that year, too, in a different way."

"We were idyllic young fools, weren't we?"

"I suppose we were. . . . When did you come back?"

"I only landed a week ago. I'm copying some pictures for Lord Lothbury. But I've been to Prosperity Street. I stayed there for two nights. You've been good to the Gallus household, Frank. I was glad of that. And Agatha's gone to London. I saw her, too. What a long time since we went to the Orphanage for her. . . ."

That opened the floodgates of our reminiscence. We sat recalling all that had befallen us together, until we told, each of us in turn, what had befallen us alone in the years that lay between us and the day of Joan's flight.

"What a self-centered, selfish pig I must have seemed to you. . . ." I said at last.

"Never that. It was I who felt inadequate and—and—and inept in some way. I never doubted that you loved me, and I knew I loved you, but I felt as if it had all come about by false pretenses, that you'd find me out, and begin to despise, and dislike, and perhaps hate me. I was only a girl, Frank. But I was right. Even when I used to lie awake crying about you, in Paris, I knew I was right. I've been certain, these past years, of it."

My trouble was that I was almost certain myself, but with a conviction that I was only certain because I had degenerated from the ideal that once had upheld me. After all, the "things" that I had done were not those of which

I had once boasted to Joan. The dozen volumes of my writing, the pettifogging measures that I had inaugurated or opposed, the game of make-believe that I played at places like Wexminster Towers, the casual manner with which I habitually greeted relationships which had once inflamed me, these rose up to arraign me as a traitor to my dreams.

A neighboring clock chimed noon.

"Let us go and have some food. I want to feel that it really is you, and not a dream."

She rose to her feet and shook her skirt straight. She had been sitting hatless, that I might the better appraise her altered self, and she carried it in her hand as we walked. Whatever else she had sacrificed to the years, I knew she had made no terms with the conventions of her time.

We lunched in an ornate hotel, a middle-aged man and a middle-aged woman talking placidly together, but I knew that in me there was stirring again an old fire that had for long been dormant ashes and dead embers, and I guessed that in her was rising an answering flame, for her voice was altering and her eyes were no longer regarding me with quite the merely affectionate appraisal which had held me during our talk in the park.

§ 3

She was staying, it seemed, in the empty and deserted Lothbury Hall. The Lothburys were in Scotland, and Joan, attended by what part of their retinue was permanently stationed in the Hall, was painting quietly in the great gallery. She had intended to hire a conveyance of sorts to take her back, but after we had returned to the store over which my friend the County Court Judge presided, to make her purchases, we spent the afternoon together, wandering the pleasant streets and tea drinking in tea shops until it was time for me to meet Mary Marvin. To her I explained the romance of my encounter with

Joan and we traveled the road as far as Lothbury's place a sedate trio.

"Won't you come on and dine with us?" asked Mary, but Joan refused.

"Some other time, then?"

Some other time most certainly.

It came to me with annoyance that in the glamor of our talk I had not arranged to meet her again.

I stepped out and opened the door of the car, keeping the man in his seat with a gesture.

"I'll come over to-morrow," I said.

"Yes, do," said Joan, and gave me a nonchalant hand.

"What a pretty and unusual woman," said Mary, as we drove on.

"Pretty is hardly the word . . ." I said, doubtfully.

CHAPTER TWENTY

§ 1

MARY MARVIN lent her mare to me the next morning, and insisted upon bedecking me with a buttonhole of her own cutting.

"You look like Young Urchard of Taunton Dene setting out for his wooing," she said as I mounted.

"I feel rather like him," I rejoined.

"Where are you really going? You've been very mysterious."

"I'm going to visit some of my trusting constituents."

"You are going to canvass Lothbury Hall, I guess."

"Why should I canvass Lothbury Hall?"

"Because you are an incurable romantic. I ought to write to Florence and warn her that you're misbehaving yourself with your little artist woman."

"You can—when I do."

"I will—*when* you do."

She was stroking the arched neck of the mare as we talked.

"Take care of Prudence for me," she said. "Don't break her knees. You never could ride, you know. It's rather sporting of me to let you have her."

"I know it is. Good-bye, till they bring me home on a gate."

"Don't be gruesome. Good-bye."

I turned once in the saddle and she was still standing watching me. I waved to her and she fluttered her big gardener's gloves in response.

As I rode I thought, strangely enough, more of her than of either Joan or Florence. There was something in her serene composure that I found enviable. She seemed to have shed all desire and all regrets and yet not to have lost her understanding and tolerance of the regrets and desires of others about her. I felt that I took with me her good will whatever my enterprise may have seemed in her wise mind to be. Not until I turned the mare into the bridle path which led almost directly to the gates of Lothbury Hall did I allow the submerged emotion within me to escape the restraint which my will had for so many hours imposed upon it. I was to see Joan again—and Mary Marvin became as spectral as Florence and her two boys, as remote and vague as all the servitors upon my careerism, and they were as unreal as figures in a dream but dimly remembered on waking. A mood of boyish, unreasoning happiness took hold of me. I whistled and sang as I rode, and cantered the little mare across the park-like field through which the staid pathway ran its sedate course to the welcoming gateway.

Lothbury's groom took my mount, and the house-keeper, a prim embodiment of five centuries of feudal tactfulness, made me free of the house, after my query for Miss Agnew. I was "The Member" and the Duke's

friend, and, in such capacities, was a person to be humored. So it was that I entered the long gallery unattended.

Joan was perched on a tall ladder carefully working at some detail of the Titian and looking herself not unlike a Venetian from the same brush.

It seemed to me that my riding boots clanged on the polished floor, but she did not hear my approach. She had a brush held between her lips, as I had so often seen her holding such a brush in the days when her only studio was the back bedroom of the little house in Prosperity Street, and she was wearing a long sage-green painting smock. The illusion of youth was momentarily perfect. It did not amaze me that she seemed so little changed, for I myself felt then not that the years had slipped away from me but that they had never been.

"Hullo, Jimbo." I said.

She looked down, taking the brush from her mouth.

"Hullo, Dogsboddy. I'll come down."

I moved to help her, but she rattled down the ladder before I reached it.

It was long since I had known anyone so thoroughly glad to see me. She laid aside her palette and slipped out of her smock.

"I wasn't really working," she said. "I've been far too excited waiting for you. Meeting you yesterday made me a girl again. I never thought I'd take it so lightly."

"Lightly!"

"Yes. I expected it would be all melancholy and sad and like a novelette. But it isn't, you know. I've been working myself into a nice pathetic state for all these years, and then when the right minute comes for pathos I'm like a child who's found a lost sixpence. I don't believe that you have a wife and a family and a name. I dreamed all that. We're just us, as we always were. What are we going to do?"

"I thought we might wander over the valley to Little

Pennypot. There's a good inn there for lunch. Will you come?"

"Of course I'll come," she laughed out at me. "They'll think you're the young squire in that rig. Do you know, I can't picture you as a riding man. I don't know why. I s'pose it's because I've always thought of you as a young man with a bedroom full of books. Wait for me until I get my hat."

I waited as impatiently as any lover, not even pretending to be interested in Lothbury's pictures or Joan's new canvas. In the hall she told the housekeeper that she would be out for luncheon.

"They don't quite know what to make of me," she said as we crossed the park, "and I don't quite know what to make of them. It's the very first time I've ever been in a place that size in England as anything but a mere sight-seer. I s'pose you've become hardened to it."

"I've a place almost that size myself, now," I glumly confessed.

"It's a big price to pay, even for your things."

"What is? And what things?"

"I mean, having to waste yourself on big places like that is a big price to pay for being able to work at the things you care for. I've never understood why political people can't work like artists, instead of like showmen."

"Do they work like showmen?"

"Of course they do. They *are* showmen, most of them. You don't suppose that many of them have your fine notions about the Aristocratic State."

I was completely at a loss.

"Why, what are my notions about the Aristocratic State?"

She turned her head sharply and gave me a quick searching look, her forehead wrinkled in the old familiar way.

"You know. The emergent men."

"The emergent men?"

"Don't be mean, Dogsboddy. I'm not stupid, even if I have lived in Italy for a decade."

It was I who felt stupid.

"You were always ready enough to talk about your theories to me in the old days," she added. "Do you remember how angry you were when Sinbad said your selected, responsible men would be prigs and snobs, that morning, when we unpacked your books?"

I did remember. I remembered vividly. But I had not remembered for years past with what fine schemes I had filled my head when I had grandiloquently dedicated myself to statecraft in that narrow bedroom over which the plaster cast of Goethe had so surprisingly brooded.

"Selected, responsible men," I murmured. "Yes. I often talked of them, didn't I? What a bore I must have been."

"You were a dear."

"Was I? I wonder."

"Have you found them?"

"What—my wonderful 'specially selected, responsible men'? No. I've neither found them nor made it easier for them to emerge. I forgot all about 'em once the machine got me. It's funny when I come to think of it. I've been so busy for so long that I haven't had time to do anything. I've managed to procure all the trappings and paraphernalia for the great conjuring trick, but I've forgotten what the trick was that I wanted to do. But I've been a tower of strength to the party. That's a comfort, isn't it?"

"Why, Frank, you sound bitter. I thought you were happy and triumphant and—and—"

"And all that kind of thing. I am, my dear. I am as happy and as triumphant as a man could be. I'm here, with you. As for the rest, it's been the Great Illusion. Let's not talk of it."

"But, Frank. . . ."

"Listen, Jimbo, if you say another word about what

I am or what I was, I'll deliver a political speech to you that'll last from now till to-night."

"All right. But tell me about your boys."

I told her the usual things that one does tell of one's children.

"You must be proud of them," was her comment.

"I suppose I am, in a queer, rather detached way."

"If I'd had boys. . . ." She stopped the sentence abruptly, thinking, as I thought, of how nearly my boys had been her children instead of those of Florence. Her next question surprised me.

"Are you in love with your wife, Frank?" she asked.

"Yes. Very much so."

"I'm glad of that. So many men seem not to be. I suppose she's very lovely."

"She's a very good sort. She's always wanted to meet you."

"Then she knows all about me?"

"She knows that we were once—great friends. She used to see us together."

"That's another thing. I can't see you married and with sons. I used to think you'd be the sort of man who'd be immune from that kind of thing, afterwards."

Whether she meant after she had left me or after I had grown out of the susceptible calf-love years of adolescence I could not guess. I had a growing and most uneasy feeling that she had cherished an image of me as unlike the reality as my image of her must have been. As I had consoled myself with a vision of an ever youthful Joan perpetually displaying the romantic qualities of a love-sick girl, she had consoled herself with the vision of an ever youthful Frank Peyton perpetually displaying the heroic qualities of an ardent devotee to some austere ideal of statecraft and fine living. And we were actually what? A woman carrying well the physical burden of early middle-age and a man steeped in the magnified trivi-

alities of modern political life to the exclusion of all wide or aspiring thought.

We had come to the center of the valley which separated Lothbury Hall from the village of Little Pennypot, and our path had brought us to the edge of the small tarn that lay there. Save for the faint echoes of guns from the moors above and beyond us, there was nothing to remind us that we were of a world of men and women. Adam and Eve were not more alone than we seemed to be. It was with the shock of Crusoe discovering that mysterious single footprint that I noticed by the edge of the tarn an abominable green-painted iron seat painted with the name of an urban district council. There was a climb before us, for Little Pennypot lay up the hillside.

"What about a rest?" I asked.

"We might as well. The morning's young yet."

"How long ago is it since we sat together on just such a seat as this?" I fatuously asked as we settled down one in each corner with a ridiculous yard of space between us.

"Don't ask. I think it was yesterday. Did you take your new love to the old haunts?"

For some absurd reason that hurt me.

"You know I didn't. After you went I hadn't any new love. At least, not for years after."

"Years, Frank?"

"Well, two or three years—more."

"A lifetime of constancy."

"But Joan. . . ."

"I know. You needn't explain. I've grown awfully wise since those days."

"You mean . . .?"

"No. I hadn't any new loves. I could have had—plenty of them. There were times when I almost let go of things. I was never a very frigid person, was I?"

"No, I suppose you weren't."

I contrasted, even as I spoke, the placid surrender of the girl Joan with the ardent inviting of the girl Florence.

How much calmer a wooer I would have been, I thought, had things been different, how much more of its glamor the mere passion-content of love might have retained, how deeper would have been the significance of all my relationships.

She interrupted my thought.

"Do you still find people as amusing as you did?"

"Amusing?"

"Yes. How we used to laugh at all the funny people there were in the world. I don't laugh much nowadays, Frank."

"Nor I."

"I never met anybody afterwards who had your appreciation of the individualities of people."

"I'm afraid I've lost that, Joan. One does, you know. When the stage fills up the supers all become mere types. One grows irritable with mannerisms, instead of being amused by them. It's part of growing up. Like children, you know, and the way they'll laugh at a sentence with one unusual word in it."

"Do they?"

"Yes. They roar with laughter. But after a while unusual words don't strike them as being funny, but only as being a bit of a nuisance."

"And yet that picture dealer didn't irritate you, yesterday. He amused you. You were quite the old Frank when you warned me that he was a County Court Judge in disguise."

"Oh, I'm not quite grown up. But almost. At any rate, I'm past the stage when I turn round to look at a pretty girl's ankles. That's one of the signs. Only boys and very old men do that. I've lost the sense of novelty about things, I think."

But even as I spoke I knew that I lied to her and to myself. I hadn't lost the sense of novelty. I had only conveniently mislaid it, and now I had found it again. It was with quite the old thrill that I let myself be amazed by

the fact that I was I and she was she, and that by incalculable contrivances we had been brought together by that still tarn under an August sun. Her spell was potent again. I wanted nothing better from life at that moment than to be with her, to feast my eyes upon her, to make her my standard, judging colors by her coloring, sounds by the timbre of her voice. It began to matter nothing that her figure was no longer that of a lissom girl and that she was no longer formative under the same influences that were forming me. Still less did it matter at that moment that under an accepted code I had given to another woman, no less potent to enrapture me, an allegiance which should have prohibited any willing response to the renewed magic which was now affecting me. There was nothing of desire, in any ordinary sense, in the feeling to which I was conjured. There was only the certainty that in her presence I was happy, and that I would be unhappy away from her. I could not then, I cannot now, analyze such a conviction, but I knew it for what it was, the symptom of that state which in our easy idiom we are content to call "being in love." I was "in love" again with Joan, had, indeed, never been "out of love" with her, sincerely and unmistakably as I loved Florence, and differently as I felt towards each of them.

Had Joan come back crippled or rendered grotesque by some marring stigma it would have been the same with me, I knew, and that she had come back recognizably the Joan who had filled so many of my vanity-pandering reveries and compensating day-dreams was, however felicitous, incidental. Sitting there beside her, warmed into a new sense of well-being by her radiant charm, I began to see my life as an interval of feverish but wholly unsignifying activity between the two essential moments of our meetings. I was so wholly at my ease with her, took her own similar reaction towards me so much for granted, and was so thoroughly complacent about the inevitability of our relationship from thenceforward, that it did not

so much as occur to me that we had yet to explore any future courses of action before we dared to assume that we could take up, where she had once severed it, the peculiar bond that had held us, and reknit it. But she must have been pondering our renewed association more practically than I, who had been content to sit bathed in the emotion it had sent surging over me.

"It will be queer, going back with a new you to think about. I like the new one surprisingly well, you know. Do you like the new me?"

"There isn't any new you. You are Joan come back again."

"That's sweet of you, Frank, but it isn't true. Wrinkles here"—she touched the corners of her eyes—"and all kinds of odd changes here." She tapped her temples with her forefingers, like some gesticulating child, and with an expression of such exaggerated lugubrious concern that I laughed at her. "It's all very well to laugh, but that doesn't mend matters. I'm quite a new Joan, really, and you have to take me 'as such.'"

I took her hands at that and drew her nearer to me.

"I do take you 'as such.' I take you for better or worse, because even the new Joan is still the old Jimbo."

"Yes. That's true enough, I think. I haven't changed essentially, only superficially. But you've changed essentially, you know."

"Have I?"

"But of course you have! Don't you feel it?"

"I suppose I do feel it. But I feel this, too, that I could slough off the accretions without very much effort if I had you near to me."

"But you won't have me near to you. This is only the shortest of episodes—a dream within a dream. Do you still read Poe?"

"I haven't opened him for years. Nor has anyone else so much as mentioned his name or quoted half a line of him. Strange. He was part of our lives once, wasn't he?"

'Thou wast all that to me, love, for which my heart did pine. . . .'

She completed the verse for me, before asking, "And Morris? Do you ever open a Morris nowadays?"

"Never."

*"Her hair is bright still, yet it is
As though some dust were thrown on it.
Her eyes are shallower, as though
Some grey glass were behind: her brow
And cheeks the straining bones show through,
Are not so good for kissing now."*

She smiled her queer little rueful smile.

"That's what Sinbad would call 'damned apt,' isn't it, Frank?"

"No. It isn't. Listen, Joan. You're not going back."

"But I must."

"You can't. You've got to come home to England."

"Yes. I know. So that I can become a comfortable kind of Aunt to your boys, while we forget, you and I, that I was ever anything more than a friend of the family. No thank you, Frank. It isn't possible. I wouldn't have come back at all, only Lord Lothbury's offer was too good to refuse. I have to think of my old age pension, these days, you know. I shall not be able to copy for many more years. It's much harder on the eyes than pukka work. If I'd thought the chances of our meeting were as they have been, I wouldn't have come at all. Now we have met, I'm glad. But I'm going back as soon as my job's done."

"But Joan. . . ."

"You're being the same romantic boy that you used to be, aren't you, sitting here holding my hands and thinking that you want me, and that if only we are together all will be well with the world."

"I know that if we aren't together, all won't be well with the world."

"You haven't found the world very ill all these years, you know."

"Haven't I? I wonder. I found it ill enough after you ran away from Prosperity Street, and it hasn't been exactly perfect since."

"I don't suppose it has. But it wasn't I that you missed, Frank."

"Don't be prosy, Jimbo. You're going to tell me it was Youth that I missed. It simply isn't true—or it's only partly true. It was you that I missed."

"But you found someone else."

"Yes, I know. But not to take your place."

"Do you think *I* could take my place, now, after all that has happened to us both?"

"Yes. You've taken it already."

She released her hands, and laughed.

"Frank, you're trying to flirt with me, as you would with any strange woman at a dance, if she'd taken your fancy. I can't believe that you're a serious politician, with 'interests.' I'm not to be flattered with. If you must flirt with somebody, flirt with Florence Peyton, not Joan Agnew."

"But Joan. . . ."

"It's no use, Frank. You'd better be sensible. Let us go on now. You're not safe in these romantic surroundings."

She stood to her feet, and I, too, rose. I could not myself at that moment have said whether I was seriously hoping to keep Joan from returning to her life in Italy, or whether I was merely playing at being in love with her because I was anxious for some assurance that time and monotony together had not robbed me of my capacity to feel the surges of youth.

"I *am* serious, Joan," I said, as if it had been she and not myself who questioned it.

"Please, Frank. . . ."

"Oh, all right. Come on, then. Let us slog up this con-

founded hill, and you can tell me what you do with yourself at Rome."

"That's much better."

And it was with studiously impersonal talk that we filled the day. As I rode back to Wexminster Towers I realized that not only had I been happy, but that being with Joan had dismissed from my mind, for the first time since the earliest days of my marriage, the vague consciousness of disillusionment and dissatisfaction which had marred every ostensible fulfillment of my pettifogging ambitionism. It did not occur to me to ask myself whether she had shared my happiness, but I had a fine glow of self-righteousness as I added to my letter to Florence that night that I had met again the little art mistress of whom she had once thought herself to be envious.

§ 2

I contrived many hours with Joan that week, and one night she dined at the Towers, but old Vale monopolized her that evening and discussed pictures with her, having met her the year before when she had been painting in Florence. All through our talks together ran the undertone of what to me became each day a more dominating emotion, though we preserved a semblance of friendly detachment. But my stay in the North was no indefinite vacation. I had commitments in London which I could break only at the cost of imperiling the interests of those associated with me, commitments which were themselves to become later not the least romantic part of my political story, that story which I am striving hard not to tell here, even by implication, as I tell the story of my heart. After I had fulfilled the engagements in town there was the week at Sunnington to be filled.

It was the day before my arranged departure from Wexminster Towers that I grew impatient to the point of rebellion with the convention, which at her implicit insti-

gation I had observed, that we were no more than friends met after long absence. She had, with a skill which might have warned me that she was wilfully controlling the course of our relationship, tempted me to review again, ostensibly for her satisfaction but actually for my own redemption, the whole conception which I had formed of the purpose which I served in my public life. Hitherto I had, in my talks with Florence, reviewed spasmodically isolated aspects of that purpose, but now, under Joan's influence, I found myself taking up my world and seeing that it was not good. It was not that I did not confess to this new interlocutor the ignoble expedients and mean stratagems by which a man of my time was compelled to attain to whatever power he possessed, but that I no longer excused them. What to Florence had seemed, as, indeed to me, brave adventures or cunning wiles, seemed to Joan, I could not doubt, degrading compromises and inexplicably stupid choices of cowardly subterfuges where bold stands would have more probably saved the battle. She was no prig, but she had a certain ingenuous faith in the simplicities of life which abashed in me the trifler with complexities. She had reminded me, too, in our interchanges, that there was still existent a satisfaction which the world offered freely but which I had for so long ignored that I had forgotten its potency. She recalled to consciousness the beauty-lover who had been beaten into a quiescent oblivion by the more forceful self who had directed all my activities for so long. I began to recall with her the beauty that could lie within a phrase, the loveliness of line and color, the power which those created associations that she called "intentional harmonics" had to renew in the jaded mind the primal zest with which one had first greeted the surprises and changes of form and tint. She had a queer vocabulary which evoked in me a desire again to fit phrases to concepts with an exactitude which was its own reward. Her "intentional harmonics" was coined, I recall, during a long argument on the age-

old theme of the place of conveyed effort in art. We had wrangled over a passage in Ruskin which she averred had once been a favorite weapon of mine but which I had completely forgotten. It was not that she posed, or that she was, in the idiom of twenty years after, a "high-brow." These things were life to her still, as they had been life to us all when the world of affairs had seemed to be but an attempt, shockingly inept, to translate into practice the fine theories which are the mental urges of an untutored adolescence.

It was so long since anyone had explored with me the spacious infinities which Joan habitually trod, that I felt as a man might feel who emerges from a maze of brick walls into the sudden benignity of open country, or as the bartender of some obscure vaults in a drunken slum might feel on entering the forecourts of Heaven and remembering their celestial topography as something familiar in dreams.

I had not lacked certain spurious interchanges of thought designed to be, what they were so lamentably not, the exchanges of minds applying as the criteria of living the standards not of life but of thought. Joan Agnew, in her serene maturity, did apply just those standards, and applied them as naturally as a child applies the tests of fairy stories to its own adventurings. At times I found myself unable to catch her allusions, and she was obviously puzzled by many of my own unelaborated references. She had been steeped in the works of masters whom I had neglected, and I had been busied with ephemeral products to which her attention had never been even lightly attracted. She renewed in me the awareness of vital significances which lurked beneath the surfaces of relationships. She fired me with a divine curiosity which I had not known since adolescence. The thought of severing myself from so endearing a companion grew into more than a vague ill ease and became an oppression.

And yet, I note it now with a calm amazement, it did not occur to me that I could, by renouncing all things else, secure the one thing that outweighed them.

I lied glibly to my hostess at the Towers and escaped, for the day before my return to the South, to Joan at Lothbury Hall. We went, for the last time, over the valley to the village of Little Pennypot. We could talk dispassionately of all that lay between us, and I pleaded again with her at least to defer her own return to Italy. She was still laughingly adamant.

"You'll be better without me, Frank. What could I do, these days, but hamper you to exasperation?"

"You could. . . ." I paused. What, after all, could she do that I could formulate in words. "Damn it!" I said, suddenly angry. "Don't you care? You spoiled our lives once. Won't you mend things a bit by. . . ."

Her hand on my sleeve checked me.

"No. There's nothing to mend. Why can't you be sane, Frank? There is nothing left between us, except your romanticism. Even our interests aren't the same. There isn't even passion."

"There's passion enough," I assured her.

"You like to think so, but there isn't really. I may stir something in you, Frank, but you don't stir anything in me, except a kind of fondness. I don't mean that I don't. . . ."

"Don't what?"

"Don't love you," she bravely faced it. "I do. But not in any graspable way. And you don't love me. No! You don't, Frank, you really don't. What will you think about when you go to London to-morrow?"

"I shall think of you, and all that we might have been and done together."

"I wish I could believe it. You'll think about your coming talk with Arthur Hillsdun, and your dinner with the Chief Whip, and the next Session, and your chances of buying out the Marton publishing business, and how nice

it'll be to see your boys again, and you'll wonder how Florence has arranged things at your new place. And, perhaps, you'll spare an odd thought for me over a cigar. And I—I shall think how different you have been from the boy I used to know, and how much worse you might have been than you are, all things considered, and how glad I shall be to get back to my own mode of life after the Lothburys' barracks of a place, and whether I mayn't become a great painter after all when I've made enough money as a copyist to follow my own bent."

"Are you short of money, Jimbo?"

"Not really. I'd jolly soon borrow from you or Sinbad if I were, if that's what you're thinking about. . . . What was I saying? Oh, yes. It's no use, Frank. The past is all over and done with, and we couldn't go on this way. Either we'd lose interest in each other, or we'd try and recreate things by stimulating a grand passion that wasn't really in us. No. You'll go back to-morrow, and when I've finished my work here, I shall go back, too. Things really ended the day I bolted from Prosperity Street. This has only been a kind of reverie, this Indian Summer of a meeting. If there'd been anything left worth clinging to, I'd have known it the moment we met."

"I did know it the moment we met."

"No, you didn't, Frank. If you had known it, you'd have. . . ."

"Yes? I'd have done what?"

"Never mind."

We had come through the dusk back to the great gates of Lothbury Hall. The lodge keeper kept us waiting for a moment before she opened them for us. We walked up the drive in a strained silence.

"Don't go in for a moment, Joan," I said, like some milkman to a servant girl.

We halted on the first of the three terraces which led to the doors.

"Can't I convince you that. . . ."

"That you want me to stay? No. You can't even convince me of that."

I was possessed of a great idea.

"Listen, Joan. Let me get this London business over and I'll come North again, and we'll go back to Prosperity Street together. Do you remember how you used to say that when you were rich and famous you'd go back and buy all sorts of nonsensical things from the shops . . .?"

"It'd be no good, Frank. Even the old shops are all altered. There's nothing left of our Prosperity Street except the name. This is good-bye, my dear."

"Joan!"

"It is good-bye. I see now that perhaps I shouldn't have run away from you all those years ago, and that I should never have come back. But I did both, and it can't be helped. Don't let's spoil things by play-acting about them, Frank. You've still your real life to live out, and I have mine. They're not bad lives, really."

"But Joan!"

"Come, Frank, let's say good-bye and have done with it."

She was holding out a hand that palpably trembled. My own was none too steady as I took it.

"I'm not going to say good-bye. I shall come back. . . ."

"No, you won't come back. Let me go now. You've been very sweet, Frank, these few days. You might have been—horrid. Good-bye, my dear—and good luck. Don't spoil it for me."

I released her hand. My whole impulse was to take her in my arms, as I used to take her, and win her back to the old assent to my will and mood. It was no thought of Florence that restrained me. It was the thought of the younger Joan. Between the woman and me stood the girl she had once been.

She had been more honest than I had been. All that she had spoken that day I had felt. To let her go again meant the renewal of the dull ache for her that I had once

so poignantly suffered, but to keep her near to me, to bring her reluctantly into the life that I lived, would mean a much worse pain as the years wore our association threadbare of all its surface romance.

"We'll meet again, one of these days, when we are both old, calm, and wise," she said. "So it isn't really good-bye. You've still some great things to do, Frank. You might write, now and again, and tell me what is happening to you."

"I will. And you'll write to me, now, won't you?"

"Yes. I promise you that. I'm sorry I ran away, Frank."

"It's all right, Jimbo. It couldn't be helped."

We shook hands again.

"Good-bye. I've always loved you, Frank," was her last word.

"And I, you." I said, and with that we parted.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

§ 1

THEY STOPPED the train for me at Sunnington Junction. My man was waiting on the platform to take charge of my luggage and outside the station gates Florence sat in the big car. The station master and his one porter fussed about and around me until I was safely off their property, as if I had been either royalty or a notorious railway thief.

Florence looked the ideal type of well-nourished, well-nurtured matronly loveliness, as some magazine cover designer might have conceived it.

"Hullo, Frank," she said, greeting me as some chummy school-girl might have greeted her best friend. "I suppose you're frozen."

"Frozen? No. It's warm enough surely."

"I thought perhaps Mary Marvin might have. . . ." She finished the sentence by wrinkling up her nose and making a moue.

I thought the less said about Mary Marvin the better.

"The Hillsduns thawed me out last night in town," I said.

"Oh, yes. Tell me what happened?"

For some minutes I poured out the tale of my negotiations in London.

"But how splendid! You certainly have a star, Frank."

"Yes. I know. The man of destiny. But what have you been doing?"

She, in her turn, poured out her tale.

"By the way," she ended, "the boys are making a fort in the lower meadow. I've been helping 'em a bit. Very strenuous. Don't forget to admire it when you see it."

"Rather not."

It was very pleasant, this business of coming in comfort to familiar luxuries, I thought. After all, men who sacrificed homes and careers for some high-flown notion of romance rarely achieved any real happiness after the first excitement of flight. . . . Not, of course, that I had ever contemplated sacrificing either home or career. . . . But I might so easily have done so, had I not been I and had Florence not been so benignantly herself. . . . But narrow rooms and restricted habits and all that love-in-a-cottage means outside the pages of romantic novels was a poor exchange for spacious living and love in a manor house, where one could take one's ease without thought for the morrow and without sordid and vulgar distractions from one's main purposes in life. . . .

"By the way," said Florence, interrupting my train of self-consolatory thought, "what about your little art mistress? Was she as fascinating as ever?"

"Yes. Quite. I fell in love with her all over again."

"You are an ass, Frank."

"Why? Do you think I'm too old to fall in love?"

"No, of course I don't. But I'd know if you'd fallen in love with anybody but me."

"Would you?"

"Of course I would."

"I wonder."

"I'm sure of it. I dare say you flirted with her, like you do with Mary Marvin. All your brilliant personalities do that sort of thing. But you certainly didn't fall in love with her. She's too old."

"Too old!"

"Yes. She's ages older than I am, you know. She was a woman when I was at school. But do tell me about her."

I told what I could.

"Poor girl," said Florence, when I had finished, "It must be horrid for her—living alone in Italy. She'll grow into one of those queer eccentric English old maids."

It was odd, I thought, that I felt no resentment at this. It was still more odd that I should find myself confirming Florence in her foreboding of Joan's end.

"I suppose she will. By gad, it makes me feel old."

"Funny to think you might have married her instead of me. You'd have been a kind of idyllic pair in a back street in Headley, wouldn't you? Always going to meet with terrific success, and never doing it. She'd never have let you run with George Lawton. She'd have wasted you on little books and things."

"Wasted me?"

"Um. It would have been a waste. You're going to be Prime Minister some day, you know." She had never had any doubt of it.

"Hardly," I said. "They don't, even yet, make Prime Ministers out of nobodies without a background."

"You're not a nobody. You're a somebody. And you have all the background that's needed."

The car turned from the main road and Sunnington Manor came into view. It looked more than ever de-

lectable in the late afternoon light. Florence passed her arm through mine and took my hand in a warm squeeze of purely childish glee.

"Doesn't it look jolly, Frank? This is going to be our real home, you know. Fancy Father hanging on at Headley in that poky little villa when he could have retired and bought a place like this!"

"It is rather different, isn't it?"

The lodge past which we swung as the car turned into the drive was itself as big as the little house in Prosperity Street where I had first met Joan Agnew.

We were duly decanted upon the steps. The boys were busy with some private enterprise of their own in the hall but came swarming over me at the sound of my voice. I shook them off at last and took off my great-coat.

"Hello, you've bought a new picture," I cried to Florence, who was giving some order to a servant. I crossed to where the new acquisition hung. "Good gad, Flo, it's a Birket Foster. Where did you pick this up?"

"I thought you'd like it. And I've bought the little bronze you fancied so much at the Langley Galleries. . . . Oh, and that set of Burke you ordered has come. It's fourteen volumes."

I strode away to the library to look at that, the boys skirmishing at my heels, and Florence leisurely following. We had tea in her room, she and I, having sent the boys to their own more satisfying meal.

"It's nice having you back, Frank. I never grow really used to your being away. I'm a thoroughly middle-class person, really, I suppose."

"I suppose you are. And so am I. It doesn't matter, though, does it?"

"Of course, it doesn't."

She came and perched herself on the arm of my chair.

"Your hair is growing awfully thin, Frank. You know you ought to do something."

"I will. I'll buy a wig."

"What do you think of those—they're rather nice, aren't they?" She was stretching out her legs to display new stockings. I approved them. "And I've got some Italian 'underneath' in a delicate shade of pink," she added. "Very hot stuff they are. Mary Marvin would faint at the sight of them. . . ." She rose and walked across the room. I, too, stood to my feet.

"Florence."

"Yes?" She turned and faced me, smiling with a touch of mischievous provocation in her eyes.

"Come here."

"Why should I?"

"I want you."

"Well, what is it?"

I put my arms around her.

"I love you," I told her, as if we had been married that morning.

"I know you do," she said and strained up for my kiss.

As she drew away from me I wondered suddenly what Joan might be doing.

"I'm glad you didn't run away with your little art mistress," said my wife, again seeming uncannily to follow my thought.

"So am I," I assured her, and with a sincerity which surprised me I added "more glad than you guess."

My tone must have surprised *her*, for she looked at me with questioning eyes.

"You see," I said, feeling my way clumsily towards a formulation of the conviction which had possessed me ever since Joan and I had parted in the dusk outside Lothbury Hall, "if I'd run away with my little art mistress, I'd have run away from her."

"You mean from me."

"Do I? Yes—of course, I do." But I had meant what I said.

"You're rambling, Frank. Let's go and dress. It's almost seven o'clock."

I put my arm round her.

"You know, Florence,—you're so damned comfortable," I said.

§ 2

We dined together, she and I, that night alone and with perfect simplicity. The atmosphere of home was all around me, flooding into my consciousness and affecting all things else within it.

"When you are Prime Minister, Frank, we shan't be able to do this," she said as we sat leisurely talking over the coffee cups.

"I think we shall—if I ever am Prime Minister. It'll be rather odd, won't it?"

"It'll be very jolly, to think we've done the thing you most wanted to do. It's been rather wonderful, the way you've had everything you wanted. But I suppose it would have been just as wonderful if you hadn't."

"I wonder."

My mind strayed back through the years. Pa Gallus and Ma Gallus in their own way must have felt just the mood of serene contentment with life that Florence and I were feeling. If I had remained a hack worker on the *Chronicle* occupying my back bedroom with little to look back upon but years of steady treading of a monotonous treadmill, I might still, I thought, have found life wonderful. If I had married Joan and had never met Florence and had achieved some partial success. . . . If I had married Joan and achieved all that was mine with Florence. . . . If I had lived any one of the thousand possible lives that had opened the day I walked along Prosperity Street to find the door of number 22 where lived the writer of the letter offering me a lodging. . . . It would have been different, I saw clearly, but would it have been any less satisfying? Would the next twenty years be any more satisfying whether they brought the culminating triumph or ended in a frustrated effort? What was it in

life that mattered, I wondered, since one could not keep unimpaired the keen zest and the acute sensations of youth? Some people, one knew, found all things working together for gloom, but for oneself they worked together for a good very different from that which Tennyson had celebrated, but a good distinctly to be appreciated. The novelists, of course, were all wrong. Neither setting nor relationships really mattered to a man. What mattered was the mind's acceptance or rejection of the events which unfolded themselves. Joan without Florence. Florence without Joan. Political office without the fun of running the enterprises which one had helped to build, or that particular fun without political office, upon which one's young ambition had been set. Oranges and lemons, said the bells of Saint Clement's—which are you?—oranges or lemons?—then stand behind me. By what whimsy did one choose? How grotesquely accidental it all was. If I had been revolted and not attracted by the geniality of Ma Gallus. . . . If Peter and I had not promised to dine with Bowden. . . . If the old Duke had refused to receive George Lawton and me that day. . . . If John Merry had sold not to us but the Hillsduns. . . . If. . . .

"A penny for them," said Florence from the other end of the table.

"My thoughts? I was just thinking what a haphazard thing life is, with the things one gets and the things one loses, and nothing lasting, not even one's dreams. Who was it said that you can't step into the same stream twice?"

"Some Greek Johnnie or other. But talking of streams, old General Gates is coming over to-morrow to talk about river pollution. He says you ought to bring in a Bill if you have any luck with the ballot this Session. He nearly killed me yesterday. You know how he puffs out his rosy old cheeks and says "God! What!" at the end of every sentence when he gets excited? Well, he stood on the terrace yesterday and suddenly said, "A garden is a lovely

thing—God! What!” and I thought he was reciting that poem, and corrected him before I thought what I was doing, and said ‘Lovesome,’ and he said ‘Love some! Love ’em all, if they’re decently kept.’ It was too funny. Oh, and the Vicar wants to see you about tithes. He’s another queer stick. When he flaps his handkerchief at me I want to buzz like a bee. Did you ever know such queer people?”

“Yes. They’re only old Winterbottom and Pa Gallus all over again. The world’s full of them.”

“Oh, and there’s a daughter at the Vicarage we didn’t know about. She’s been abroad studying music.”

“What’s she like?”

“Perfectly lovely—gold and cream and pink—but nothing fragile about her—radiant’s the word. You’ll love her.”

“Shall I? I don’t think so. I shall be too busy talking about tithes and river pollution. ‘Man’s love is of man’s life a thing apart, ’tis woman’s whole existence.’”

“You won’t say that when you see this creature.”

“Woman—are you egging me on to infidelity?”

“Yes. Collusion. Have some more coffee?”

My bantering mood changed to something more serious.

“You’re very sure of me, aren’t you, Florence?”

“Sure enough,” she responded. “You see, you’ve too much sense of humor to develop an infatuation, and you’re too selfish to throw me over for anything less.”

“Selfish!”

“Yes. It’s what I like about you. You take everything you want and see everybody who happens to be handy, and you do it all with an air of bewildered gratitude that’s perfectly charming. I bet you used the Agnew girl to give you a nice romantic feeling in the middle of that stupid shooting party. And you’ll use the vicar’s daughter to give you a nice youthful glow if she’ll only flirt with you just enough not to interfere with your work. You’re an old fraud, Frank.”

"But why should my selfishness make you feel sure of me?"

"Coz I'm sure of myself. You see, there's nobody who'd give you just the things I can give you after all these years—queen, courtesan, and court jestress all in one."

"'Jestress' is a good word."

"It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes, my dear, it's true." We were back again to the easy mood of banter. "But what a piece of luck for you. It might have been somebody else."

"It might have been anybody else, but it happened to be me. Aren't you glad?"

At that moment everything seemed for the best in the best of all possible worlds. There was, after all, a tryst which I could keep at the other side of sleep.

"I'm not exactly sorry," I confessed.

Finis

